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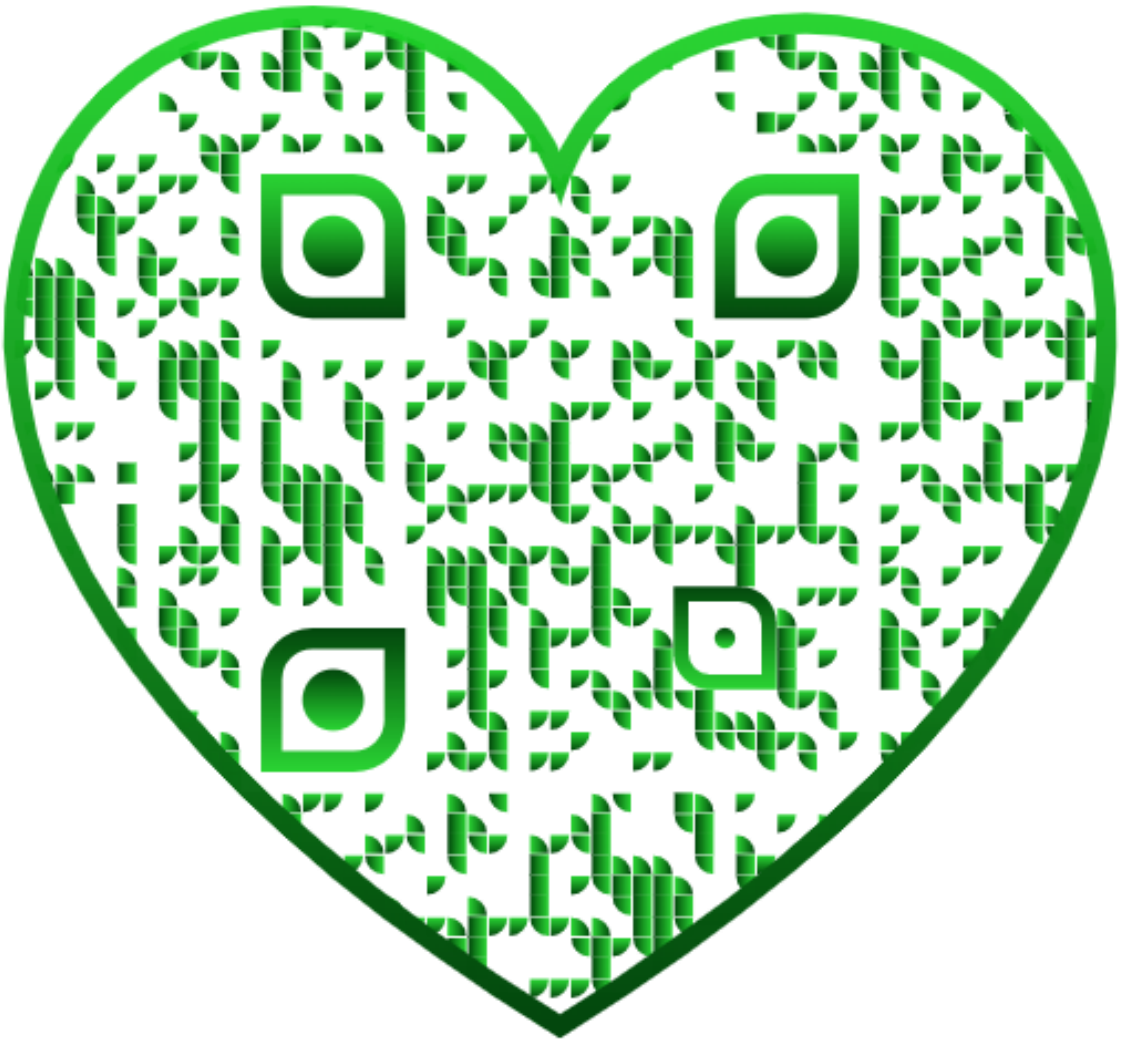

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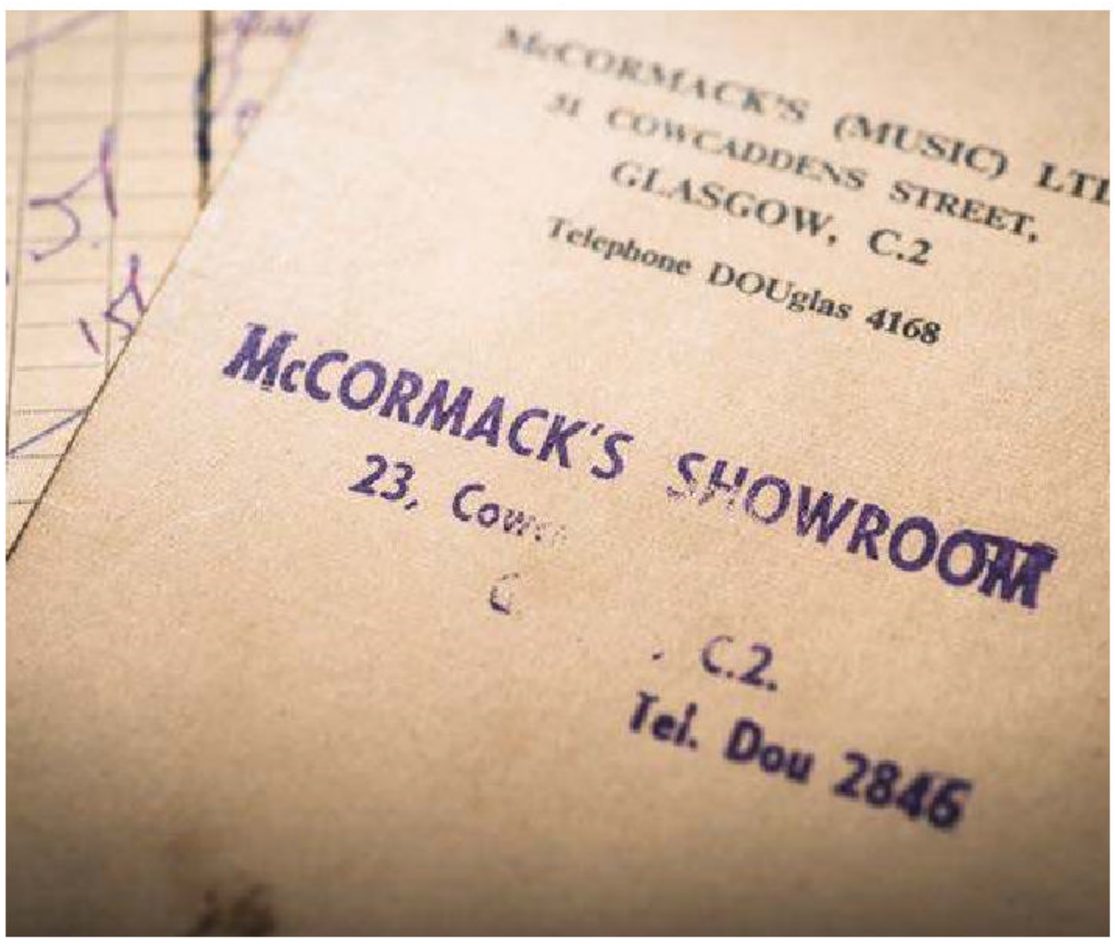
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THE LES PAUL BIBLE

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EDITOR'S LETTER

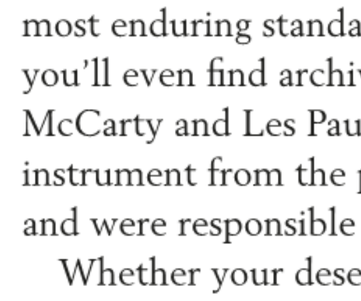
CHERRY SUNBURST PICKIN'

It might not have been the first signature guitar, but there's little doubt that the Gibson Les Paul is the greatest and most iconic. Across 132 pages, *The Les Paul Bible* charts nearly seven decades since the model made its debut and brings the story bang up-to-date with reviews of Gibson's 2019 Custom Shop, Original and Modern Collection Les Pauls.

As well as jaw-dropping photography of beautiful vintage instruments, we share pro tech tips that'll keep your Lester in fine fettle and show you how to get your modern LP sounding as close as possible to an original 1950s Burst without dropping house money in the process.

We also get our hands on historic guitars formerly owned by blues and rock royalty such as Joe Bonamassa, Dickey Betts, Paul Kossoff and Gary Richrath and we sit down with Slash – perhaps the Les Paul's most enduring standard bearer – to talk guitar. From p14 onwards, you'll even find archive interviews with the likes of Jimmy Page, Ted McCarty and Les Paul himself as we present the story of an iconic instrument from the perspective of those who shaped its design and were responsible for cementing its popularity.

Whether your desert-island Les Paul is a heavily checked old Goldtop or a pristine new Standard, there's something in this edition of *Guitar Specials* for you, but be warned – once you get bitten by the Les Paul bug, it's a hard habit to kick. And when you've read this publication from cover to cover and perused every detail of the instruments inside, head to *Guitar.com* for plenty more where this came from… G



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STAR GUITARS
JOE BONAMASSA'S 1959 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD 'SPOT'

When Joe Bonamassa decided to sell one of his most distinctive Bursts, a young Frenchman with a remarkable story was on hand to add it to his star-heavy collection…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

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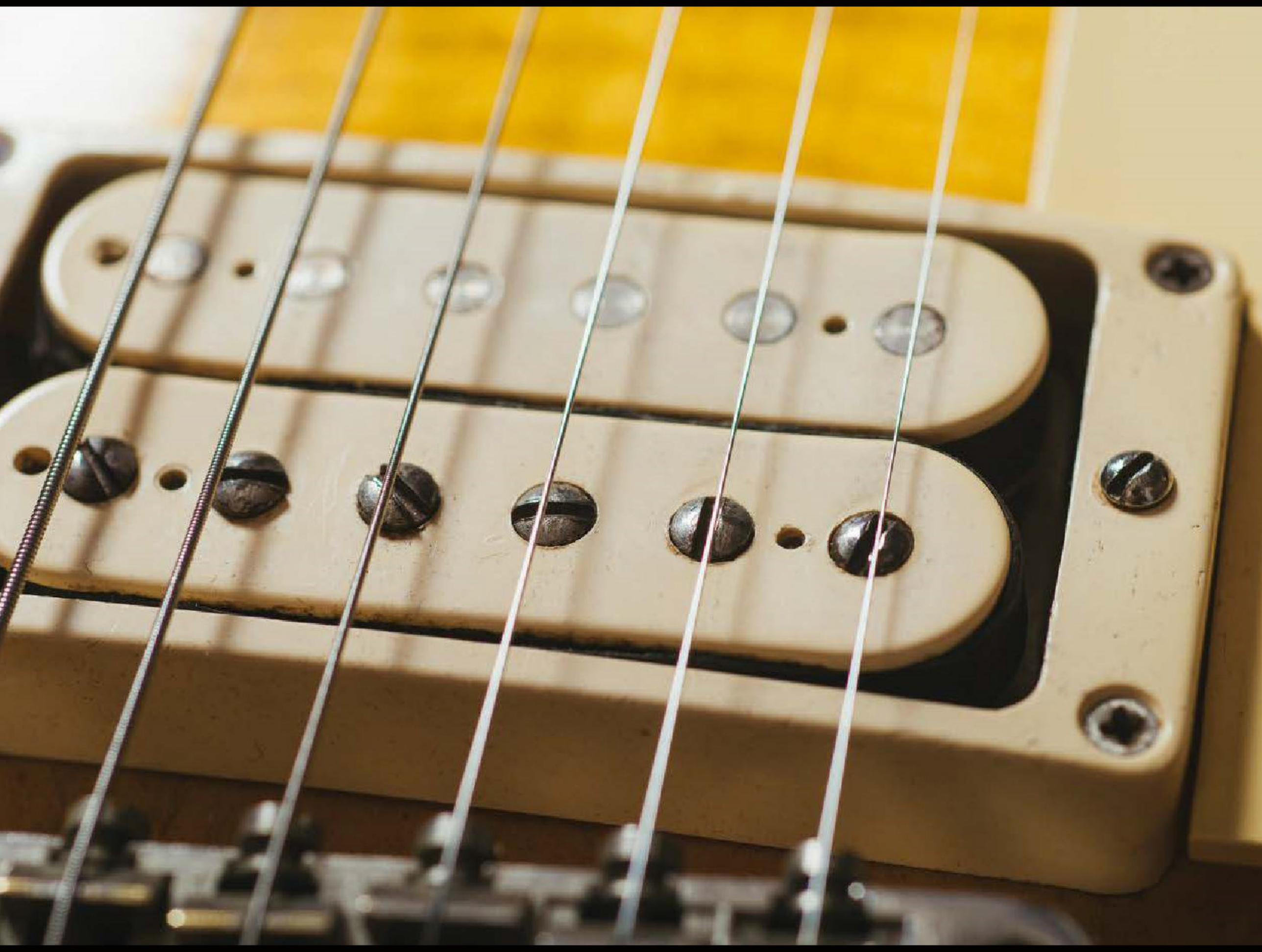
Gibson



There aren't too many 25-year-olds who can tell you what it's like to buy a 1959 Les Paul from Joe Bonamassa, or pull guitars out of their collection that were formerly owned by Jimi Hendrix, Paul Kossoff and Jeff Buckley. But Frenchman Matthieu Lucas isn't your average 25-year-old – in fact he might be the owner of one of the most impressive and star-studded guitar collections in Europe.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that an inheritance or lottery win can be the only explanation for someone so young being in possession of a treasure trove of gear, but Matt simply traded his way up. A few years back, Matt took the money he'd saved waiting tables to buy an old Jazzmaster – little did he know that the guitar in question was an extremely rare Jazzmaster prototype. He sold that guitar for a lot more than he paid for it and ever since, he's been buying and trading on the way to establishing an impressive stable of classic guitars now on display in his Paris showroom.

Perhaps the jewel of Matt's glittering collection is 'Spot', the Gibson Les Paul Standard serial number 9-1688 with distinctive double-white PAFs, an incredible top and the unfaded dark patch of finish down at the tail end that gave the guitar its nickname. Although Spot has changed hands several times, in recent years it's been one of Joe Bonamassa's go-to Les Pauls. When Bonamassa put the guitar up for sale through Rumble Seat Music in Nashville – the city in which he was in the process of buying a second home – Matt took the opportunity to buy a guitar that he'd long lusted after.

"It was a guitar that I always loved," he remembers. "Even when I didn't know anything about Bursts et cetera, when I was zero-scoring with Bursts and I hadn't played one, I called this guitar the double-white guitar. I always loved the sound of this guitar, especially at the Borderline show [filmed for Bonamassa's 2013 *Tour De Force* DVD], because Joe had a massive and woody sound. When Joe was playing Spot, he had that special thing that he didn't get, in my opinion, on another electric guitar. Even with [his other Les Pauls] Skinner or Snakebite. The neck pickup of Spot is really special."

When a guitar of this stature comes onto the market, prospective buyers have to move fast. "When Joe decided to sell it, I saw the news and we texted each other," Matt recalls. "I texted the guy who was managing the sale at Rumble Seat Music. The day Joe

ABOVE Spot's rare double-white PAFs contribute to a sound that owner Matthieu Lucas believes gave Joe Bonamassa "that special thing that he didn't get on another electric guitar"

decided to sell Spot, it was a done deal. Joe was very patient with me and he gave me a lot of time to cover it, because he knew that it was going to be one of my dream guitars that I would keep and play. I think he loved the way that we were as passionate about the guitar as he could be.

"Every time I see Joe, when we talk about Spot, he says: 'Yeah, I still love that guitar.' I don't think he regrets it, but he surely misses it… I think he owned it for seven or eight years, it was in his rig for every tour, every studio album, he composed a lot with it. It was a big part of his vintage-guitar career.

"The day I came back to France with the guitar, I immediately had to go to the French Alps for a small holiday and I couldn't let Spot be at home… it was impossible for me. I sent Joe a picture of the guitar in front of the snow! But he knows it's in good hands and it's a very special guitar for me."

The 25-year-old admits to now having played close to 200 original Bursts. In the light of his experience, we ask Matt what, even by the stratospherically high standards of 1958-'60 Les Pauls, makes Spot different. "With Bursts, they have so much personality, different energy and different character," he explains. "It's a very personal thing. Having Spot is like a dream I still don't believe! I'm not supposed to have that kind of guitar yet. But the tone is very special, and very different to other Bursts I've tried. The neck pickup is very woody, it sounds almost like a Strat."

We guess that this one's not for sale, at any price, and Matt confirms our suspicions. "The guy who will buy this from me is not born yet," he laughs. "If I had to sell everything, I'd sell everything except that guitar. It's very special for me. I hoped to own it one day, but I didn't think Joe was going to let it go."

That brings us to our next question: what does a guitar collector do once they've found *the* one? "There's always another Holy Grail!" Matt affirms. "It's always very tricky, because if you've got the real virus that I've got, it never stops! I was lucky enough to play Rick Nielsen's Explorer recently… it's really something! It has even more power than a Les Paul, it's a totally different experience. It's like a lion that hasn't eaten for seven days!

"But you never know," Matthieu reflects. "Some day you wake up and receive an email that changes everything… it changes your year. Real geeks like us will never find the solution to our problem!" **G**

To see more of Matt's guitars, visit mattsguitar.shop

OPPOSITE Spot's finish is beautifully preserved and the dark unfaded patch at the tail end is what lends the guitar its nickname

Gibson
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ROCK SOLID

THE ORAL HISTORY OF THE LES PAUL

Gibson's Les Paul signature model eventually came to define the sound of rock music – a role it still delights in to this day. Yet its design was a protracted process, with many twists and turns. Here, we present its story first-hand, both from its creators and its most famous players…

WORDS TONY BACON

This is the insider's story of the early days of the Gibson Les Paul, the company's first solidbody electric guitar. Following Fender's introduction of the Broadcaster and Telecaster in 1950 and 1951, Gibson decided to compete, signing up America's most famous guitarist of the time, Les Paul, to endorse its new instrument.

Through the years that followed, Gibson's Les Paul Goldtop (introduced in 1952), Les Paul Custom (1954) and Les Paul Standard or 'Burst' (which replaced the Goldtop in 1958) formed a strong basis for the company's solidbody line, which also featured a couple of budget models: the Les Paul Junior (1954) and the Les Paul Special (1955).

This oral history of the early Les Paul and its famous players comes from the archive of interviews I've done over the years for my books about Gibson. The people you'll hear from are: Billy Gibbons, who was in his pre-ZZ Top band Moving Sidewalks in 1968 when he

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Les Paul Custom Ebony finish $395.00
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Les Paul Junior Amplifier
5-C Cover

improvements, some changes, in his Epiphone that he used. They didn't make an Epiphone with his name on it – everything they made was Epiphone."

DESIGNING THE LES PAUL

Les Paul

"Leo Fender saw what I was doing and he started to make one. And when Gibson heard about it, they said find that guy with the broomstick with the pickup on it! They came round right away, soon as they heard what Leo was doing. They came over to me, and I says: 'Well, you guys are a little bit behind the times. But okay, let's go.'"

Ted McCarty

"We started out to make a solidbody and we had a lot to learn. For instance, the stiffer the material, the harder the wood, the more shrill is the sound, and the longer is the sustain. Hit the string and it would ring for a long sustain period. It could be too long. One of the things we did was to take a piece of iron rail from the railroad track, put a bridge and a pickup and a tailpiece on it, and test it. You could hit that string, take a walk, come back, and it would still be ringing. Because the thing that causes it to slow down is the fact that wood gives a little bit.

"We made a guitar out of solid rock maple. Wasn't good. Too shrill, too much sustain. And we made one out of mahogany. Too soft. Didn't quite have that thing. So we finally came up with a maple top and a mahogany back, made a sandwich out of it, glued them together. Then we decided, now what about the shape? We wanted something that wouldn't be too heavy. The Fender was a much larger guitar, heavier. So we made ours a little smaller bodied, in a traditional shape.

"We had always carved the tops of our fine guitars, and we had real fine carving machines. Leo Fender didn't have any carving machines. They joined their neck with a plate in the back of the guitar. We always glued our neck in, made it an integral part. So I said: 'Okay, let's carve the top of this thing, like we'd do on an L-5 and an L-7.'

"We finally came up with a guitar that was attractive. And as far as we were concerned it had the tone, it had the resonance and it also had the sustain, but not too much. Now we needed an excuse to make it. None of the other major guitar companies had anything to do with a solidbody. Their attitude was forget it, because anyone with a bandsaw can make a solidbody guitar. Bandsaw and a router, that's all you needed.

"So I got to thinking. At that time, Les Paul and Mary Ford were riding very high, they were probably the number-one vocal team in the United States. They were earning a million dollars a year. And knowing Les and Mary, I decided maybe I ought to show this guitar to them."

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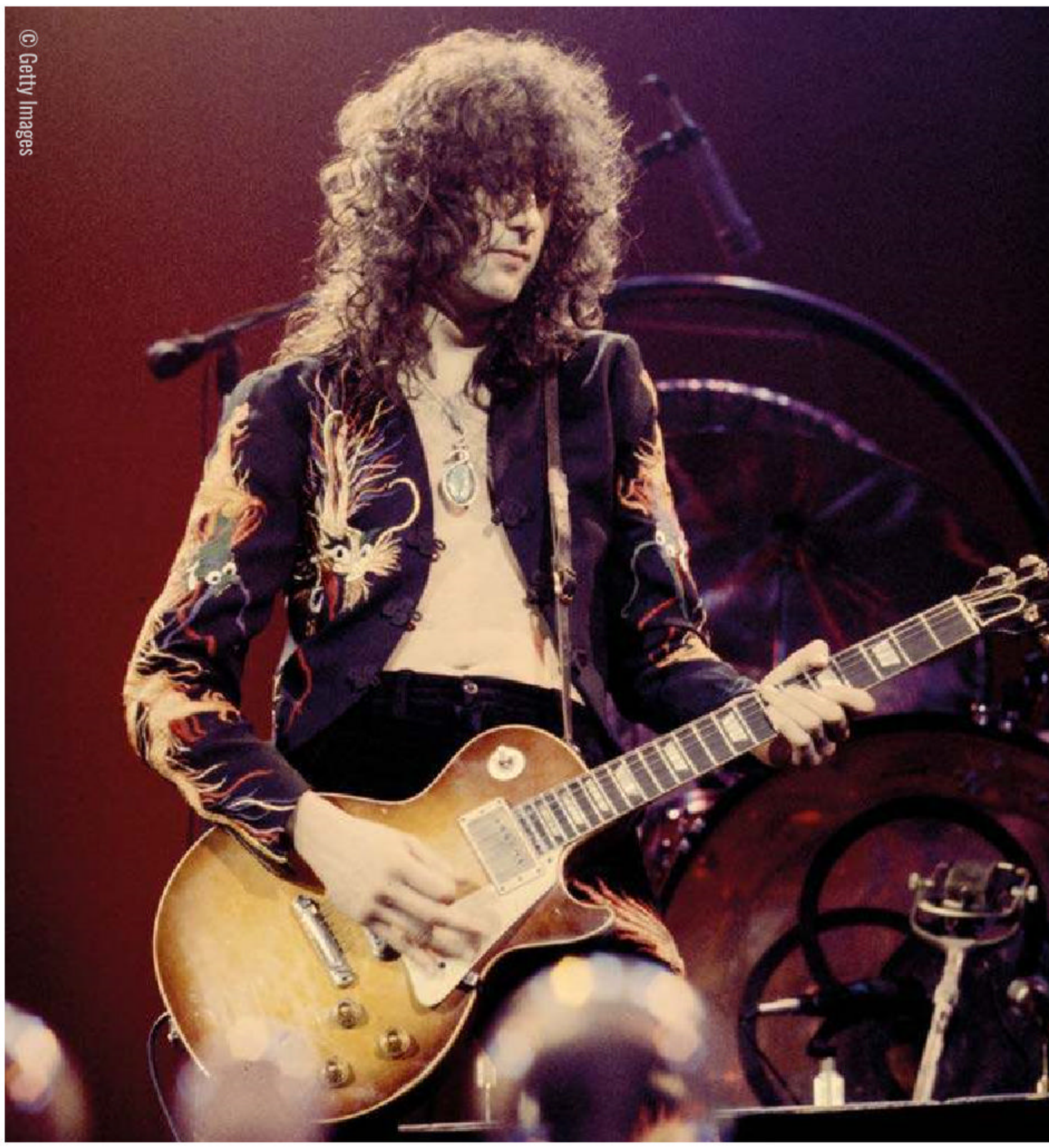
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“I SAID: ‘I’VE GOT SOMETHING HERE, LES, THAT I’D LIKE YOU TO SEE.’ WE HAD AN AMP AND WE HOOKED THIS GUITAR UP. HE PLAYED IT – AND HE PLAYED IT AND HE PLAYED IT...”

FACING PAGE LEFT The Log – Les Paul’s original prototype

FACING PAGE RIGHT This beautiful ’59 Burst was the inspiration for Gibson Custom’s 2016 Minnesota Burst, 39th in a series of painstaking recreations of storied instruments

FACING PAGE BOTTOM The lack of fingerboard binding and the diagonal bridge pickup height-adjustment screws denote that this now-heavily modded 1952 Goldtop model is one of the first ever made

MAKING THE DEAL

Ted McCarty

“Les and his group were at a hunting lodge in Delaware Water Gap, which is up in the mountains in Pennsylvania. I had been talking to Les by phone, and I talked to Phil Braunstein, his financial manager, a New York accountant. So I made a date with Phil, flew into New York, had breakfast, got in his car, and I had this [prototype] guitar with me.

“It was an all-day drive from New York down there, we got there at night, pouring down with rain, a miserable night. “I said: ‘I’ve got something here, Les, that I’d like you to see.’ We had an amplifier and we hooked this guitar up to it. He took it, and he played it – and he played it and he played it. There was this balcony upstairs with bedrooms leading off it, and Mary Ford was upstairs, so he hollered up: ‘Mary, come down here, I want you to see this.’

“Mary came down. He says: ‘Play this, Mary, I want to hear and see what you think of it.’ She took it and played it, and she said: ‘I love this.’ Les said, ‘Let me have it,’ and he played it some more, and he turned to Mary and said: ‘Look, they’re getting too close to us, Mary, I think we ought to join them. What do you think?’ She says: ‘I like it.’”

Les Paul

“It was a flat-topped guitar at that time, it was not an archtop. I designed everything on there except the belly, the arched top. I had a flat-top. I sat there with Maurice Berlin at CMI, and he said: ‘You know, I like violins.’ And he took me through his vault and showed me his collection, and he says: ‘Would you consider making it in an archtop?’, and I said I’d love it. He said: ‘Nobody else – Fender, nobody else – can do that, and we have the facilities to do it.’ So I said: ‘By all means, let’s do it.’ So we made them.”

Ted McCarty

“Les had taken his Epiphone and had made a lot of changes to it, put some pickups on it that he had made. I had been after him for a couple of years, trying to talk him into Gibson, hadn’t been successful. So I said: ‘That’s what we want to do, we want to call this the Les Paul model.’ I told him that we would pay him a royalty. I’m not an attorney, and nor was Phil Braunstein, nor was Les. So we started making a contract. And I have a theory about contracts. The more simple they are, the better they are. If you have five pages of gobbledegook, what I call ‘boilerplate’, you hire a smart lawyer and he’ll find loopholes in it. A simple one, anyone can understand. So we started out on it, first thing we did was write out how much we would pay him per guitar.

“We agreed it all that night. So I came back to the factory and now we had a Les Paul model. I’d been trying to get Les to let us make him a guitar for years, with no success, but we finally had something that he liked. So then we started to produce them.”

GOLDTOP/CUSTOM/BURST

Ted McCarty

“We did the gold finish because it covered the blemishes in the wood, the cosmetic appearance. If it was maple [like the later Burst], it had to be fiddleback maple, had to be perfect, couldn’t have any blemishes, couldn’t have any mineral streaks in it. But we used to cover it up with that [gold] paint.

“We added the Les Paul Custom just to have another one. You have all kinds of players out there that like this and like that. Chevrolet has a whole bunch of models, Ford has a whole bunch of models. And there was a good reason for it. We were having more and more of a problem getting real good clear mahogany from Honduras. We’d get mahogany and it’d have streaks in it and whatnot. So that Les Paul

Custom was a solidbody, it was not a sandwich, it was solid mahogany, but painted black. So you had some with streaks in it? You made Customs out of it. Dolled it up fancy with binding and other things on it, and sold it for a higher price."

BILLY'S DIVINE MUSIC WITH PEARLY GATES

Billy Gibbons

"This guy I knew in Houston, John Wilson – he had a Rickenbacker 12-string, they sounded like The Byrds, they were called The Magic Ring – he rang one day and said: 'Hey, word is you're looking for one of those Les Pauls.' I said, 'Yeah'. He said: 'There's a farmer, a rancher, up the road, just outside the city limits, big ranch out there, a big cattle man, cattle and horses. Well, he's got one of those things.'

"We had secured a 1936 Packard automobile, and we had a friend of the band, Renee Thomas, she had an opportunity to audition in California to win a part in a movie, so we gave her the Packard. She called up, says she's in California and she got the part. Well, finally she sold the beater Packard and sent me this cheque for, I think, $350. I swear, the cheque arrived in the mail, and my buddy pulls up and said: 'Hey, let's go out see about that guitar.'

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We get there, the guy said: 'You want it, you can have it.' I said, 'How much you want?' He says: 'How much you got?' I pulled the cheque out and says I just got this today, $350. He says: 'I'll take it.' So I took off with that guitar! "We had named that car Pearly Gates and when Renee sold it, I called her back, I said: 'I got this guitar with the money.' She goes, 'Well, we're gonna call that guitar Pearly Gates and you're gonna play divine music.'

"I'll tell you, man, that is some kind of guitar! This was 1968, right after summer. I've wondered along the way why this particular example of the Les Paul ['59 Burst] is so robust. Really, the only explanation is that it just happened to be put together on the right day. The right combination of wood.

"It was all guesswork back in those days. The particular day that all of the disparate elements came together was just that magical moment, I suppose."

JIMMY'S MOVES: CUSTOM/TELE/BURST

Jimmy Page

"I got my [three humbucker] Les Paul Custom in the 60s… there was Selmer's [shop in Charing Cross Road] and then there was one further on, at the time it was affiliated somehow, called [Lew Davis], and I bought it in there. I remember going in and there was a sort of cash desk, and the guys behind it and right up on the wall… I said: 'Oh my god, let me try that!' What it was doing in there and why, but it was there. It was just… I fell in love with the bloody thing.

"There weren't many around. It was just such a gorgeous-looking thing and it sounded so wonderful. The middle setting wasn't what you'd expect it to be, but it was a really spiky sound that was really superb. I customised it with some switches so you could get into any combination, and [in 1970] it was the one that got stolen.

"In 1969, Joe Walsh turned up at The Fillmore or Winterland, one or the other, in San Francisco and he bloody insisted, he said: 'You've got to buy this guitar!' [It became Page's 'Number One' Burst.] And it actually looked as though it'd been refinished. I said: 'I don't necessarily need it.' 'No, you've got to have it, just try it, you'll want it,' and all that. I said: 'I've already got the Custom.' 'No, no, you've got to try it! You've got to buy this guitar!'

"He kept insisting. I said: 'Ah, no, no, no, I can't afford it. You know how it is.' This wasn't like dealing with Selmer's. He was really sporting – he's still sporting about it now. Because everyone goes oh, you sold him a Les Paul for whatever it is, hundreds of dollars. It was a pro-rata price, he wasn't stealing me up and he wasn't giving it to me as a present.

"I knew it was a good guitar. I knew there wouldn't be the feedback, the squealing I got from my Telecaster, which every night there was a whole episode of controlling that. The first album is done on the Telecaster, because it is a transition from The Yardbirds to Led Zeppelin, it's exactly the same guitar. Everybody had that if they started turning up a Telecaster loud. So Joe insisted that I bought it, and I did buy it, and I kicked off the second album with it.

"There's no guarantee that I would have played the… I don't know, it's hypothetical, but I may not have come up with the riff of *Whole Lotta Love* on the Telecaster. That fat sound you're working with, you are inspired – well, I am – and I know other people are, by instruments, the sound of the instruments. And then they're playing something they haven't played before – and it's really user-friendly, and suddenly they've got some sort of riff, which is peculiar to that moment. I'm not saying that's the first thing I played on it, but it was to come.

"I always knew the Les Paul was a really user-friendly guitar over, say, a Strat or something like that. It's really sympatico. So many things start singing, you know? Really singing." **G**

"IT'S HYPOTHETICAL, BUT I MAY NOT HAVE COME UP WITH THE RIFF OF *WHOLE LOTTA LOVE* ON THE TELE. THAT FAT SOUND YOU'RE WORKING WITH, YOU'RE INSPIRED"

OPPOSITE This stunning 1954 Les Paul has the killer combination of low-wind early 1950s P-90 pickups and a wrapover tailpiece

ABOVE This 1956 Les Paul Custom has a 'staple' single coil in the neck position. The Custom was introduced in 1954 to fulfil Les Paul's wish for a more luxurious-looking guitar that looked "like a tuxedo"

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HISTORY CLASS

Gibson Custom's 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard is the rejuvenated company's latest attempt to replicate the most sought-after vintage guitar of all time. With more accessible pricing than other recent reissue models and the emphasis on attention to detail, is this Gibson's best Burst reissue to date?

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

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ABOVE Gibson's alnico III Custombuckers are unpotted for a more authentic PAF-style sound

OPPOSITE TOP The metal parts are aged for a suitably vintage look

OPPOSITE MIDDLE The switch tip is period-correct Catalin, while the 'poker chip' surround is silkscreened cellulose acetate butyrate

OPPOSITE BOTTOM The butyrate top-hat knobs were originally recreated for 2015's True Historic range

Once the beating heart of youth rebellion, rock 'n' roll is now of pensionable age and the tools that powered its evolution are knocking on a bit, too. The Les Paul is a case in point, but Gibson has chosen the 60th anniversary of its most lusted-after incarnation to release what may be the company's best, most vintage-accurate Les Paul Standard since Eisenhower sat in the Oval Office.

Billed not just as a tribute, but a 'clone', this 2019 model incorporates some of the R&D that went into Gibson Custom's Collector's Choice and True Historic lines, saluting the instrument used to such blistering effect by the likes of Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Michael Bloomfield and Jimmy Page. From period-correct hangtags to 3D-scanned top and neck carves and chemically recreated old-school plastics, the idea is to give Les Paul aficionados a guitar that ticks all the right boxes without costing as much as a house. Time to dig a little deeper…

WHY '59?

For most vintage-guitar collectors, sunburst Gibson Les Pauls from 1958-60 are the Holy Grails. Over the years, Gibson's various reissue models have encouraged guitar players to think of particular features as specific to certain model years, but the reality is that 1 January 1958 didn't see Gibson throw away its gold paint and immediately start applying cherry sunbursts. Of the 434 Les Paul Standards that left Parsons St, Kalamazoo in 1958, approximately half were Goldtops.

Production officially switched over to sunburst finishes and two-piece maple tops during July 1958, but the earliest factory 'Bursts', as they've become known, were serial numbers 8 3087 and 8 3096. According to Gibson's ledgers, these instruments shipped on 28 May 1958 and were logged as having a "special finish".

We encountered 8 3087 – generally regarded as the 'First Burst' – at Carter Vintage Guitars in Nashville in 2016 and it's a spellbinding instrument. Although its three-piece maple top isn't quite as aesthetically pleasing as the centre-joined, two-piece tops that followed, in every other respect, it appears that Gibson already had the formula nailed.

That said, some small but significant changes were phased in during 1959. For many, this crystallised the Les Paul Standards made during the period through to early 1960 as the high-water mark of electric solidbody manufacture. And we're not referring to

the move to squarer corners on the jack socket plates. The key updates from a playability standpoint were the arrival of wider fretwire and slightly slimmer neck dimensions, while the most desirable period also coincided with the serial-number range in which the red pigment in the guitars' sunburst finishes was most susceptible to fading when exposed to UV light.

Although the more colour-fast 'tomato soup' Bursts with thinner necks from later in 1960 are regarded as less appealing by some hardcore Les Paul fanatics, we're still talking about some of the best electric guitars ever made, with a monetary value way beyond the reach of 95 per cent of the population. Yet for the most part, it's the '59 – aided and abetted by the adoration of a laundry list of rock luminaries – that holds the most allure.

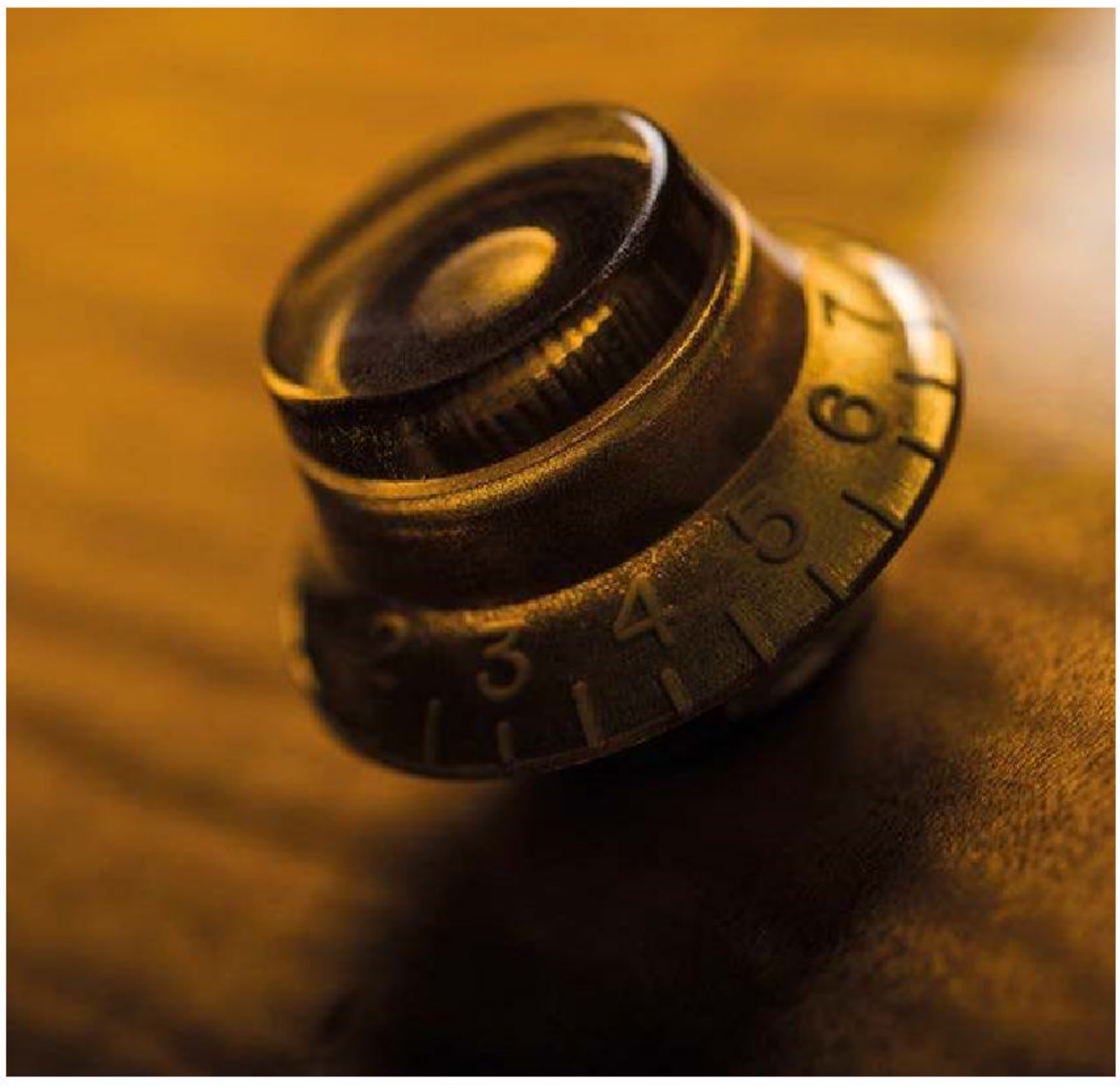
REWIND THE TAPE

Celebrating six decades of the most famous guitar in its back catalogue, the newly reinvigorated Gibson unveiled the 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard at Winter NAMM 2019. Despite the doom and gloom surrounding the company's finances, the Custom division has been doing some stellar work in recent years and our review guitar benefits directly from the research and development that went into True Historic and Collector's Choice. With True Historic now discontinued and the Collector's Choice concept having run its course, there's still scope to use the data, hardware and manufacturing techniques to inform new reissue models.

This manifests itself here in a top and neck carve taken from the Collector's Choice #37 'Carmelita' model, (created by 3D scanning the original Les Paul, serial number 9 1953) and the presence of plastics recreated for the True Historic programme unveiled in 2015, such as the amber Catalin switch tip and laminated cellulose acetate butyrate pickguard. For some, these are steps down the rabbit hole too far, but hardcore Les Paul aficionados inhabit a world in which imperfections such as chatter marks are desirable details on a reproduction scratchplate or truss-rod cover. Don't believe us? Check out the prices people are willing to pay for original vintage parts or high-quality aged repros on Reverb.

It's Gibson Custom category product specialist Mat Koehler's job to sweat the small stuff and he considers the use of hide glue for the top-to-back, fingerboard-to-neck and neck-to-body joins to be "a big part of the recipe" of the new 60th Anniversary guitar. "It was developed in 2014 for the True Historic models," says Mat. "It really does make the guitars more acoustically resonant and measurably louder, on top of being historically accurate.

"A louder and more resonant solidbody guitar produces better tone," Koehler insists. "People talk about the clarity of original PAF humbuckers and forget that a lot of that is the sound of the instruments themselves. The pickups capture the



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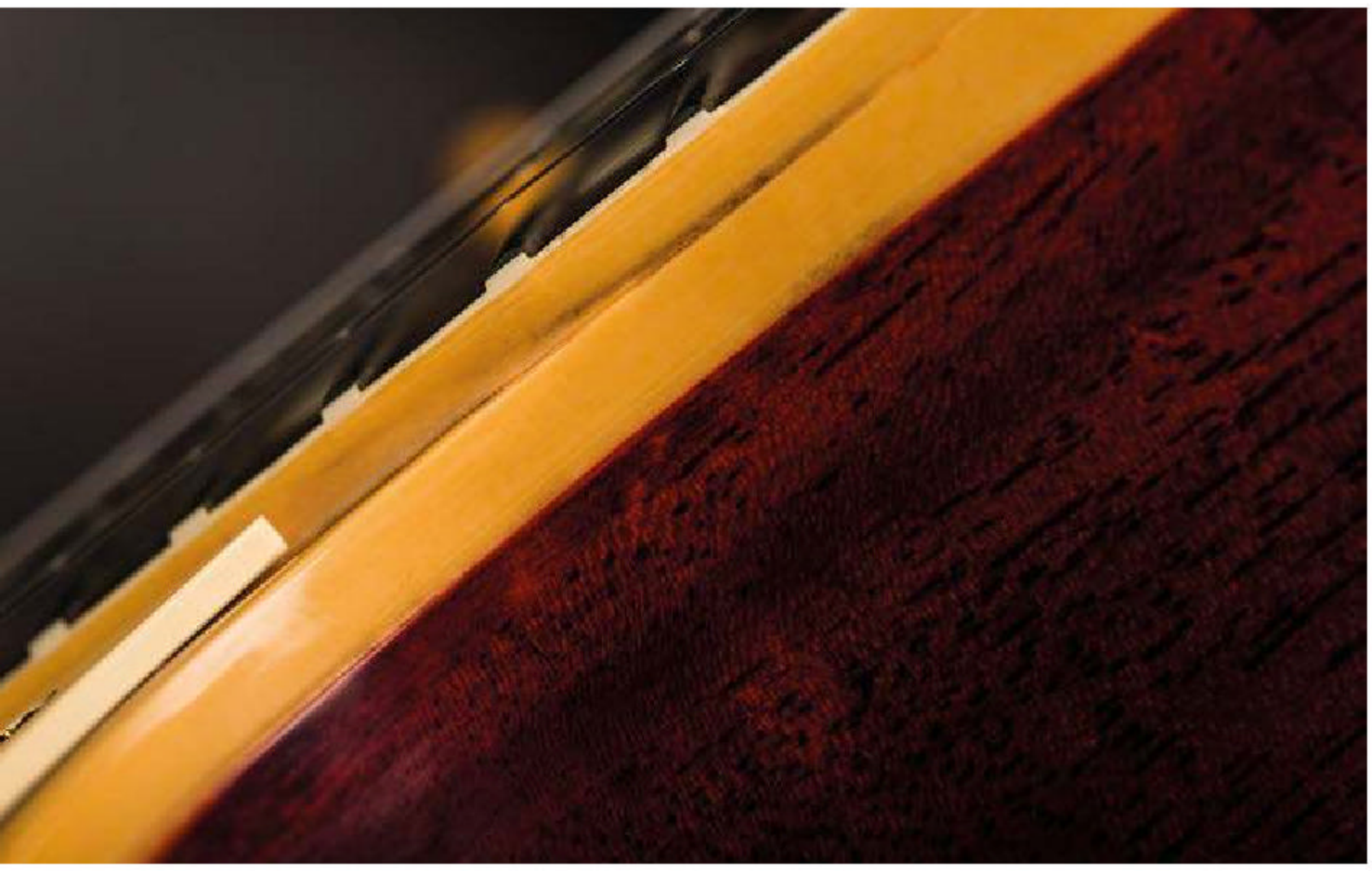

ABOVE TOP The trapezoid fretboard inlays are aged cellulose nitrate

ABOVE BOTTOM Darker aniline dye on the back and sides of this 2019 model even out the contrast between the mahogany and the maple sliver in the cutaway

essence of the instrument as much as the design affects the tone shape."

This ties in with the philosophy that an electric guitar should be thought of holistically, as a system in which the component parts working in harmony is the key to a great-sounding instrument. Rather than a straightforward process of replication, Mat reveals that finding the missing pieces of the puzzle involved "lots of time spent analysing 1950s Gibsons under the hood and lots of time spent A/B-ing various potentiometer brands and tapers and values against the original 1950s Centralabs. Hearing the differences in alnico II, III, IV and V magnets in our True Historic humbuckers and establishing consensus on a winner. Choosing to celebrate the sound of unpotted humbuckers and that squeak and squeal we're used to hearing out of vintage Les Pauls.

"It's weird science," he admits, "but we learned that attempting to replicate the 1950s processes and materials wouldn't always provide the result we were looking for. The composition and quality of those materials translates differently to what's available today. So we really had to use our ears, and we brought in artists and collectors and experts to make sure we weren't crazy [laughs]."

One such artist was Jason Isbell, himself a Burst owner after recently acquiring 'Red Eye', the 1959 Les Paul formerly owned by Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist Ed King. "We just had Jason here with his '59 Burst," reveals Mat. "He A/B'd it against a 60th Anniversary '59. He was absolutely flabbergasted. It was fun to see. The originals have this great transparency and 'bloom' and 'woof' and 'squeak' and all the other ridiculous words used to describe PAF tone. As soon as we removed the wax potting, I really feel we opened the door for all those elements of classic PAF tone to appear – especially when paired with the new wiring harness.

"Finally, some of the differences for 2019 were just aesthetic things fuelled by my obsessive-compulsive disorder," Mat admits. "We tweaked the headstock logos, the Les Paul silkscreen, inlay material, and colours of the bursts, dyes, metallics et cetera. Some of the parts have seen improved accuracy as well, and there is more minor work to be done to that extent, but we really tried to throw everything at these guitars that we possibly could!"

HANDS ON

The 60th Anniversary model's five-latch reissue Lifton case has reproduction hang-tags in its internal pocket along with a more modern Custom Shop COA (and better foam protection for the headstock). It might not be an original '59, but it's still a thrill to see an instrument such as this framed by the brown case's pink lining. Before we even pull the guitar out, simply walking around it reveals how much the mineral-streaked two-piece flametop ripples under lights. Just like many of the old ones, the maple cap looks almost plain from some angles and heavily figured from others.

The headstock looks the part, with tinted clear coats over the mother of pearl Gibson logo lending it an authentic greenish-gold hue, while the position of the finer and lighter silkscreen signature and the stepped truss-rod cover with its slightly rough-textured white edging should appease internet-forum extremists. Back at the body end, if you're wondering why the screw holding the pickguard onto the bracket is a slot-head rather than a Phillips, the answer is there was some randomness in this regard back in 1959, but plenty of Bursts left the factory with slot-heads. Panic over.

While the guitar's nitrocellulose finish has only a very subtle VOS treatment, its metal parts have a factory-aged patina and even a little rust here and there – the overall aesthetic vibe is one of a remarkably well preserved vintage instrument. Royal Teaburst is one of 10 finishes that are available, all emulating various stages of cherry-sunburst fade, aside from Kindred Burst, which is a tobacco sunburst. Around the back and sides, the aniline dye is a little darker than the shade used on other recent reissues and as a result, it's harder to see the sliver of maple in the cutaway.

ABOVE For 2019, Gibson has revoiced the guitar's controls for a more authentic range of tones

This guitar's major departure from vintage specifications is, of course, the absence of a Brazilian rosewood fretboard. Gibson has only been able to source very limited quantities of high-quality Brazilian rosewood in recent years and none of it has shipped overseas since 2003. It isn't even a custom option for US customers and is only made available in limited runs.

However, there are two options for fretboard material when it comes to 2019's R9 – Indian and Bolivian rosewood. Thanks to CITES, many of us have been forced to become armchair experts on *Dalbergia latifolia*, but our review guitar's Bolivian 'board – with its smooth finish, dark-brown hue and far less noticeable pores than Indian or Brazilian rosewood – requires further investigation.

"Bolivian rosewood is essentially pau ferro from Bolivia that has been sorted and processed in Brazil and selected for its visual characteristics," reveals Mat. "It's dark and dense, unlike some pau ferro you see out there. The reason we offer it as an option is because it's export-friendly in the current CITES climate and it's a *great* fingerboard wood to use. It's actually a little closer density-wise to Brazilian rosewood than Indian rosewood."

So which does Mat prefer? "Honestly, I believe you can't go wrong. Indian and Bolivian are both great choices. No one has detected any tonal differences, as far as I know. I would expect maybe a little less compression and more clarity out of the Bolivian because of the density. But we're talking about splitting hairs here."

At the fretboard edges, the binding is thin and the fret nibs are suitably understated, while the side dots are tortoiseshell, as they were in the 1950s. Even with a 3D scanner recording hundreds of points all over the neck of a vintage guitar and that data being used to program a CNC machine, the hand-sanding that takes place after the automated carve means that there will always be slight variances. The 'Carmelita' neck profile here feels just about perfect, with its appealingly soft shoulders and a 22.3mm first-fret depth filling out to 25.1mm at the octave.

IN USE

What are we looking for from a great Les Paul? Although there's a hell of a range when it comes to musical reference points, our dozen or so meaningful encounters with real Bursts have revealed more similarities than differences. One

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thing that's common is treble, and lots of it, with extended upper harmonics and enough high-end presence to play faux-pedal-steel country licks.

Think about the stinging attack of Bloomfield and Beano and how those huge, biting lead tones are reminiscent of a Telecaster on steroids – there's something horn-like in the adenoidal, almost vocal quality of single notes. It's easy to hear how the PAF fits into the Gibson pickup family tree as a logical step forward from the P-90, with which it has so much shared sonic DNA.

Without being shackled by heavy potting, the alnico III Custombuckers in our review guitar have plenty of air in the high end and there's an abundance of light and shade on tap thanks to volume and tone controls that have no shortage of usable, musical range. Interestingly, the concave tops on the butyrate knobs mean that it's a little easier to get some purchase on those top hats in sweaty stage conditions than it is when using less accurate repros.

The shifting harmonics you can hear when you hold a chord and listen closely to this guitar's acoustic sustain are present in abundance when plugged in. The amplified tones range from cutting to dark and complex, yet the neck pickup is never woolly or cloying; there's always plenty of snap available if you dig in, while the bridge is the place to go for more of a nasal quack. It's powerful, too, with plenty of punch for rock riffs and powerchords.

When we rev up a Collector's Choice Les Paul loaded with original PAFs for comparison, it's clear that Gibson has indeed been listening hard. The PAF-equipped reference LP has more separation when playing complex chords and a slightly sweeter treble extension, but the strong family resemblance between the two sets of tones on offer is undeniable. Not bad when you consider that the PAFs alone are worth about as much as our review guitar.

Through a tweed Fender or Plexi-style Marshall, the 60th Anniversary model does everything a good Les Paul should, and even when pushing the amp hard with a Tube Screamer and a klone, we don't experience unwanted microphonic feedback – especially not at the kind of stage volumes at which most of us are gigging these days.

There will always be those who want to make further tweaks to a reissue guitar in the spirit of recreating every detail of a vintage instrument – even its flaws – but we'd strongly recommend getting to know what the Custombuckers can do in their latest unpotted incarnation before you consider swapping them out. And even if you do want to use this 60th Anniversary model as a platform for modifications, it's more affordable and vintage-correct than many recent True Historic and Collector's Choice models. Regardless, in its stock form, this is a dream guitar for most players and Gibson Custom has done a fine job of recreating a mid-century classic for the modern world. **G**

ABOVE Tinted clear coats over the mother of pearl Gibson logo lend it a greenish-gold hue

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £5,199 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody set-neck electric guitar. Made in USA
BUILD Two-piece figured maple top with single-ply Royalite binding, solid mahogany back, solid mahogany neck with 'Authentic '59 Medium C-Shape' profile, bound Bolivian rosewood/pau ferro fingerboard with 12-inch radius, 22 medium-jumbo frets, nylon nut, aged cellulose nitrate trapezoid inlays, holly headstock veneer
HARDWARE & PLASTICS Nickel no-wire ABR-1 bridge with lightweight aluminium stop-bar tailpiece. Kluson single-line, single-ring tuners, laminated cellulose acetate butyrate pickguard and jack plate, stepped two-ply truss-rod cover, butyrate gold top-hat knobs, amber Catalin switch tip, silkscreened cellulose acetate butyrate poker chip
ELECTRICS 2x alnico III unpotted Custombuckers, CTS 500K Audio Taper potentiometers (2x volume, 2x tone) with paper-in-oil capacitors, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/628.6mm
NECK WIDTH 42.8mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.3mm at first fret, 25.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.8mm at nut, 51.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 8.9lb/4.03kg
FINISH Royal Teaburst nitrocellulose (as reviewed), Cherry Teaburst, Factory Burst, Green Lemon Fade, Southern Fade, Slow Iced Tea Fade, Sunrise Teaburst, Golden Poppy Burst, Kindred Burst, Orange Sunset Fade
OPTIONS Indian rosewood fingerboard
LEFT-HANDERS Yes
CONTACT Gibson gibson.com

9/10 **A gorgeous Les Paul that's closer to the golden-era experience than most**

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VINTAGE BENCH TEST

WILD AS THE WESTERN WIND

With its spectacular faded flame top and double-cream pickups, this 1959 Les Paul is a fire-breathing rock monster with a storied past. Meet the Richrath Burst…

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Worldwide Rights

In the world of vintage-guitar collecting, provenance is of huge importance. And when it comes to vintage Les Pauls, the stakes are very high indeed. This is one '59 that comes with its history well documented and a former celebrity owner. Currently for sale via Lucky Fret Music Co in London's Shoreditch neighbourhood, the Richrath Burst (serial number 9 0614) is named after its former owner, REO Speedwagon's Gary Richrath. In 2018, it was played on stage at Cardiff's Motorpoint Arena by Joe Bonamassa.

Richrath – REO Speedwagon's lead guitarist, songwriter and occasional singer between 1970 and 1989 – was a Burst collector. Although there are no known photographs of him playing this guitar, it was acquired by well-known guitar dealer Jacques Mazzoleni in around 1989. The instrument had been in the possession of Richrath's ex-girlfriend and Mazzoleni's partner was a friend. From there, it went to another vintage dealer, Richie Friedman and then to noted collector Kosta Kovachev. The Richrath was traded to yet another dealer, Gil Southworth, before returning to Mazzoleni in 1998.

It wasn't long before the Richrath Burst made its way to its current owner, who has been in possession of the instrument for 21 years. The guitar also appears in several of Vic DaPra's books beloved of Les Paul enthusiasts including *Burst Believers II* and *III*.

THE RICHRATH BURST IS NAMED AFTER ITS FORMER OWNER, GARY RICHRATH OF REO SPEEDWAGON. IN 2018, JOE BONAMASSA PLAYED IT AT CARDIFF'S MOTORPOINT ARENA

DEEP DIVE

Although the guitar is largely original, close inspection reveals there are a few issues to consider. Although Klusons are the only machineheads ever to have been fitted, one of the tuners doesn't match the others and removing the replacement unit reveals a 'PAT APPLD' stamp on the underside, meaning that it was manufactured between 1953 and 1956.

Photographs from 1994 show the Richrath Burst with covered pickups. Although the current, uncovered set comprises a pair of genuine PAFs, they aren't original to the guitar.

Swapped pickups might be a concern to some, but the fact that they are highly sought-after units with white bobbins may mitigate this somewhat, along with the pair of original covers stashed inside the case. Besides the pickup connections on the volume pots, all other solder joints appear untouched. The pots are original, and the 'bumblebee' capacitors are the earlier paper-in-oil types. Visual evidence suggests this guitar was played a lot and the neck finish was duly worn through to the wood in patches. Maybe a previous owner didn't appreciate the played-in feel, so fresh lacquer was blown over the surviving finish.

Although this gives the neck the glossy feel of a much newer instrument, the wear pattern is still visible. Aside from the worn corner of the body, adjacent to the cutaway, the back was left untouched and the finish on the top is completely original.

Like many Bursts, the Richrath's fingerboard has been levelled during a recent refret. It's quite easy to see because the fingerboard-binding height tapers downwards towards the body and the tops of some side dots edge into the rollover.

According to the luthier who carried out the refret, levelling the 'board was unavoidable – someone had attempted to repair fingerboard wear divots with filler and there was also a very slight twist. There certainly isn't now: there are no playability issues whatsoever. It also helps that string pressure hasn't caused the original wireless ABR-1 bridge to

OPPOSITE The original colour survives under the pickguard to provide a tantalising glimpse into how the guitar looked when new

ABOVE The guitar retains its original Catalin switch tip

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The finish has faded to reveal mineral streaks in the maple that show up as dark lines

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sag noticeably. There's a slight curve, but the string radius is good and the strings are always where your pick or fingers expect – unlike some vintage Gibsons.

We suspect the Richrath has seen more sunshine than smoky bars, because although it's unblemished, the top has almost faded into an 'unburst'. There's still a hint of extra darkness around the edges of the deep amber lacquer, though and the vivid original cherry red survives as a pickguard-shaped shadow.

The retreated sunburst reveals even more of the outrageous flame and mineral streaks in the bookmatched maple. It has an almost holographic appearance, and when the light hits it at the right angle, the effect is breathtaking.

PLUGGED IN

Having played numerous sunburst Les Pauls from the golden era, we've learned that the reality can differ from the widely held fantasy. Some fondly imagine that 1950s Bursts exemplify the raw power, endless sustain and sheer grit of the ultimate rock guitar. Not all Bursts are created equal, but the Richrath ticks those boxes better than most.

It's certainly on the heavier end of the late-50s spectrum, although it's relatively lightweight

OPPOSITE The darker areas reveal where the finish was worn through to the wood, but the neck was later oversprayed

ABOVE The Richrath has never needed any headstock repairs and was never drilled for Grover or Schaller tuners

LEFT TOP The tuner with the darker button is a replacement, but it's an earlier '53-'56 no-line Kluson

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All four knobs are in great shape, with no damage and very little playwear

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ABOVE Besides the pickup swap, the control wiring is untouched and features four properly working pots and two paper-in-oil bumblebee capacitors

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £POA
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Mahogany body with figured maple cap, set mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, 22 frets
HARDWARE Kluson tuners, wireless ABR-1 bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece
ELECTRICS 2x PAF humbucking pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way toggle switch
FINISH Nitrocellulose cherry sunburst
SCALE LENGTH 624mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.5mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 37.5mm at nut, 50.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.35kg/9.6lb
CONTACT luckyfret.com

compared to some P-90 Goldtops and 1970s Customs and we suspect that has a bearing on this guitar's dynamics.

Uncovered double-white PAFs are a first for this writer and they present an opportunity to assess the often-debated issue of uncovered humbuckers sounding louder and brighter than those with covers intact. We are able to use the Richrath on some studio recordings and discover it has an extraordinary ability to sit in a track. Without excessive brightness or edginess, the subtleties of its tone cut straight through and there's an evenness to the dynamic response that keeps the Richrath right at the front of a mix.

At the same time, an explosive blast of harmonic overtones characterises the attack, along with massively solid single notes and an overall density that makes individual chords sound like they're double-tracked. It doesn't take long to determine that this is an out-and-out rock Burst, with exceptional cutting power, otherworldly sustain and sheer balls.

Given its stellar rockin' abilities, the Richrath's clean tones come as a bit of a surprise. These are not especially bright-sounding PAFs and there's nothing to suggest that the cover removal has enhanced the upper mids or extended the treble. But they do sound more powerful than the DC readings alone might suggest – 7.96k (neck) and 8.74k (bridge).

Both pickups are very clear and we encounter a fluid mellowness in the neck position that's pleasingly devoid of any wooliness in the low end. The bridge position sounds slightly less open and transparent, but compensates with a chewy midrange bark and a hint of cocked-wah resonance. That said, all the controls operate exactly as we would expect on a 1950s Gibson, so the tonal range and clean-up abilities are exceptional.

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A flamey top with rare double-white humbuckers make this a very desirable vintage Burst

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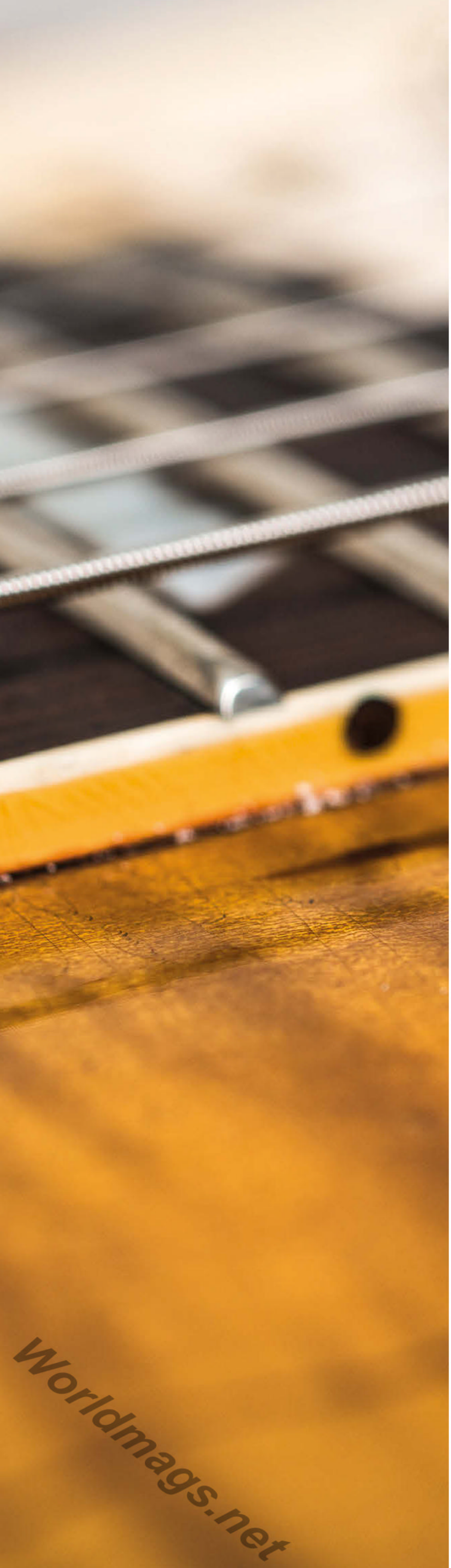

OPPOSITE The guitar has recently had a refret and the 'board was levelled in the process

ABOVE TOP The fingerboard-binding height tapers downwards towards the body

Some describe 50s Bursts as being like Telecasters on steroids, partly because they can be so snappy and airy. That broadly tallies with our Burst experience thus far, but less so with the Richrath, because it couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a Les Paul.

Despite its rocking attributes, the Richrath is not such a wild ride as the Duggie Lock Burst, which Lucky Fret sold shortly before we featured it in early 2018. That guitar seems to have a mind of its own that obliges players to either wrestle back control or hang on for the ride. In contrast, the Richrath has a milder manner and is easier to play, but by no means lacks sonic intrigue.

It's claimed that some sunburst Les Pauls aren't that special, and no doubt some are better than others, but we have yet to play an original Burst that truly disappoints. They are all unique, to some extent, but although the Richrath is by far the most rock-oriented Burst we've tested, it more than holds its own against the rest of them. *G*

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gibson Custom 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard **£5,199,**
Eastman SB59/v-GB **£1,999,** Patrick James Eggle Macon Single Cut **£4,200**

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LES PAUL

THE MAN BEHIND THE GUITAR

Lester Polsfuss was much more than the iconic guitar that came to bear his name. Les Paul was also a musical pioneer and a recording trailblazer. We examine the life of a true innovator…

WORDS HUW PRICE

If ever there was a figure in the guitar world who was deserving of the title 'renaissance man', it was Lester William Polsfuss. At various times during his life, Les could have listed his occupations as guitar virtuoso, radio presenter, guitar builder, audio engineer, record producer, inventor, TV star, hit-maker, studio designer, electronics engineer and hugely successful performing artist. He even came up with the idea of having a musical alter ego about 35 years before David Bowie dreamed up Ziggy Stardust.

Born in 1915, Les began playing harmonica and soon graduated to guitar. As a teenager he built a harmonica holder so he could play guitar and harmonica simultaneously and by age 13, he was already a semi-pro country singer and guitarist.

To get heard at venues, he wired a phonograph needle to his acoustic guitar and fed the signal to a radio speaker. Then to get himself heard even wider, he built his own radio transmitter and made a recording device from a Chevrolet flywheel to cut his own discs. He also experimented using a length of rail line to improve sustain. These early recording and guitar-building experiments clearly weren't to be his last.

TURNING HIS HAND

The only thing that Les was ever purist about was sound quality, so although his heart was in jazz, he was happy to play country under as Red Hot Red and Rhubarb Red if he could earn a living from it. By 1934, he'd relocated to Chicago and was backing up artists signed to the Decca label. The first Rhubarb Red records followed in 1936, along with a name change that stuck – Les Paul.

Forming his own trio, with Chet Atkins' brother Jim on rhythm guitar, Les and his band moved to New York in 1938. Chet Atkins recalled that a Gibson archtop given to his brother by Les became the first professional quality guitar he ever owned. Almost 40 years later, Les and Chet would team up to record the Grammy Award-winning album, Chester & Lester.

His passion for tinkering was nearly fatal, however, and Les once seriously electrocuted himself while experimenting at home. His injuries led to a stay in hospital, coincidentally, in the same one where jazz legend Charlie Christian was being treated for tuberculosis. Later, Les relocated to Hollywood and was drafted into the Armed Forces Radio Network. While there, he performed under his own name and played for superstars such as Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters. The association with Crosby continued with Les' trio backing him on a single that hit No. 1 in 1945.

It's probably unfair to call Les accident-prone, but a 1948 car crash almost ended his career. His right elbow couldn't be rebuilt and doctors advised

ABOVE Les Paul was a true pioneer in terms of playing technique, incorporating styles from all kinds of genres of the day into his own playing

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ABOVE LEFT Les Paul working in his Hollywood music studio in 1946

ABOVE RIGHT Les created his famous 'Log' by mashing up a solid plank of wood and a hollowbody archtop

OPPOSITE Les plays an early variant of his soon-to-be-famous signature instrument, circa 1950

amputation. Instead, Les had the arm set at almost 90 degrees so he could continue playing.

BIG-TIME LESTER

With his wife and new musical partner Mary Ford, Les really hit the big time. In addition to playing guitar, Les clowned around while Mary, no slouch on guitar herself, provided lead vocals. In 1951 alone, the duo sold six million records and were earning over $20,000 per week – equivalent to around $100,000 today. Their TV show ran from 1953 until 1960, by which point rock 'n' roll had put paid to Les and Mary's brand of folksy

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

The duo continued touring, but divorced in 1964 and Les went into semi-retirement. Over the next few decades, he recorded sporadically, but not without critical and commercial success – and was awarded his last Grammy in 2006, at the grand old age of 90.

His decades-long Monday night residency at Fat Tuesdays in Manhattan became a popular attraction for visiting guitar fans. Periodically, youngsters such as Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Steve Howe and his godson, Steve Miller would pop in to jam with their hero, just as Les had done with his heroes Eddie Lang and Django Reinhardt.

LES'S OTHER LIFE

In 2009, at the age of 94, Les succumbed to pneumonia complications and the music world lost a true giant. His time as a superstar may have been relatively short and the music he created is very much of its era, so why should he be regarded as such? Simply put, Les lived a parallel existence out of the spotlight and his contributions to guitar design and modern recording techniques even eclipse his achievements as an artist.

Les' name – like Kleenex and Hoover – has become synonymous with a particular product. Every guitarist knows what a Les Paul is, even if they don't know who Les Paul was. Although Les didn't invent the solidbody guitar, as some have suggested, he was certainly influential in popularising them.

LOGGING ON

His teenage experiments with railway lines demonstrate that Les understood that a solid core was needed to promote sustain, add brightness and effectively cure feedback. However, 24 inches of solid

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BY 1952, GIBSON HAD BEEN SHAKEN OUT OF ITS COMPLACENCY BY FENDER'S SUCCESS AND THE REST IS HISTORY. LES COLLABORATED ON THE DESIGN AND TESTING

ABOVE Between 1950 and their divorce in 1954, Les Paul and Mary Ford were major stars in the USA, with hit songs and a TV show

OPPOSITE LEFT The Les Paul Recording model was Les's 'ultimate' guitar and featured his favoured low-impedance pickups

OPPOSITE RIGHT Les continued to play live well into his 90s and regularly played at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City

steel rail track was clearly not a viable option. Instead, Les cut up an old Epiphone archtop body, attached a Gibson neck to a four-inch square block of pine and grafted on the body 'wings' with metal brackets. With two pickups that Les wound himself, it looked like a total lash up… but it worked!

Although Les demonstrated his musical craftsmanship with his meticulously produced recordings, he was savvy enough to realise his limitations as a luthier and he wasn't about to start a guitar company. Instead, he approached Gibson in 1941 to try and sell them on the idea. He was met with ridicule and the Gibson guys referred to Les as "that weirdo and his broomstick".

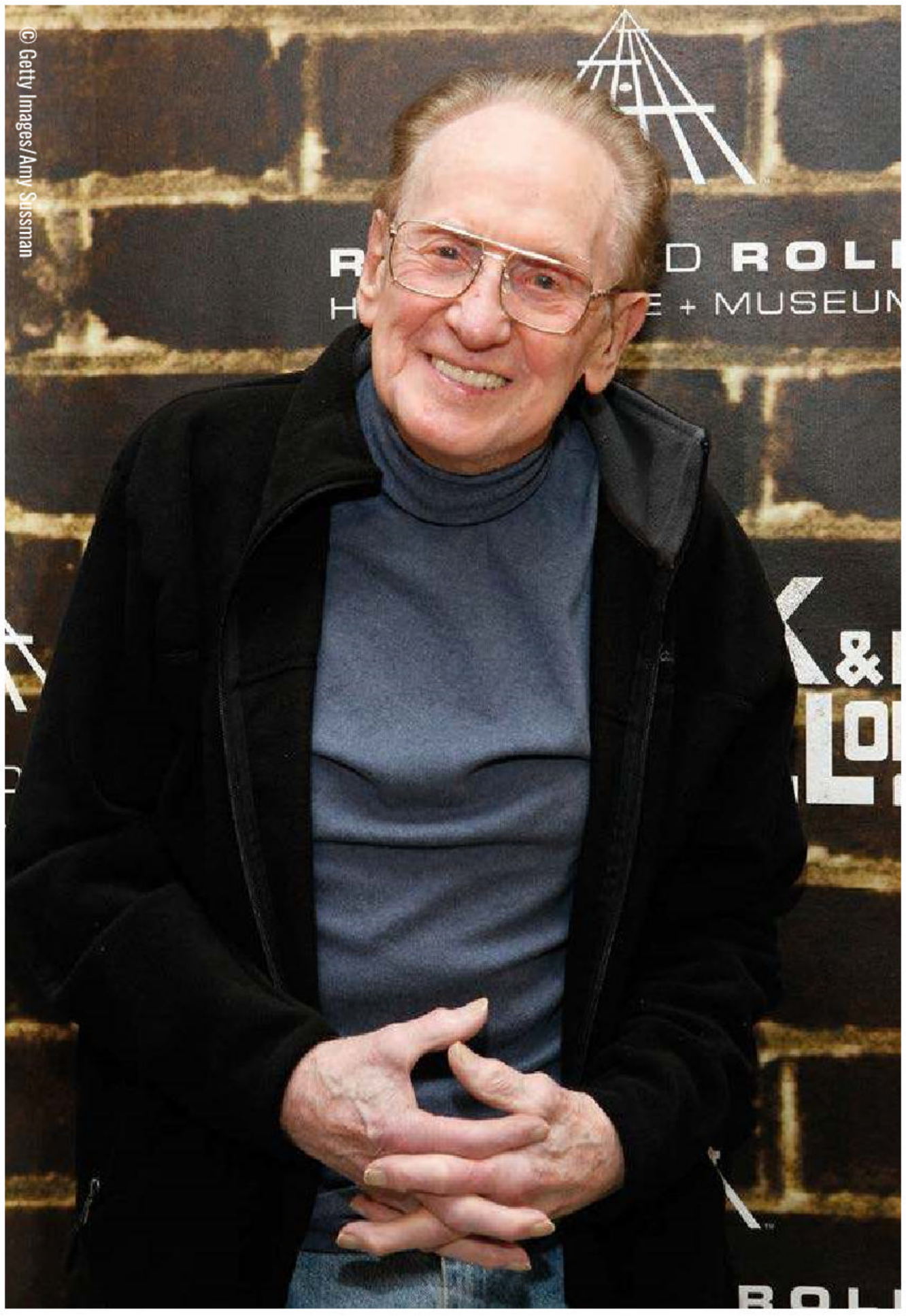
Les carried on using his famous Log on stage and in the studio through the 1940s, along with a headless solid aluminium guitar he designed and built, with tuner keys protruding from the body. It looks like a cross between a Klein and a Steinberger and you can hear its distinctive tone on *Somebody Loves Me*, recorded in 1947. Unfortunately, the design proved problematic under hot stage lights.

Then out of the blue, Les got an unexpected call. By 1952, Gibson had been shaken out of its complacency by Fender's success and the rest is history. Les collaborated on the design and tested various prototypes, some of which still exist.

Even so, Gibson was remained reluctant to take advice and, contrary to Les's intentions, the Les Pauls produced in 1952 and 1953 shipped with a shallow neck angle and the strings on his own-design trapeze tailpiece wrapped the wrong way around.

THE GARAGE YEARS

But Les' greatest and most lasting achievements were made in studio recording and production. Expressing his dissatisfaction with the sound of his own records to Bing Crosby, Bing suggested building his own studio. Before long, Les had set up one in the garage of his house on North Curson Avenue, Hollywood. Never one to put finesse before practicality, artists were required to climb in through a window because there was no door. He began experimenting with microphone placement, establishing the practice of



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close mic'ing to enhance detail and presence. This way of recording has been the industry-standard ever since. Working with acetate disk cutters rather than tape, he would record a part onto disc and then play along with the recording to create a second recording on a different disc. This sound-on-sound technique is known today as overdubbing. What's more, Les discovered he could loop the original sound back off the disc to create feedback and he varied disc speed to create harmonies, bizarre octave effects and apparently supersonic speed. The track *Lover* from 1948 is so bizarre that comic legend WC Fields told him: "My boy, you sound like an octopus".

Les had been experimenting with sound-on-sound since the 30s, so he naturally continued exploring this after moving over to tape. In 1952, he invented flanging, which featured on the track *Mammy's Boogie*. However, multi-track recording is surely Les's most lasting innovation.

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

Overdubbing on a single tape machine was basically impossible, because of the inevitable time delay caused by having separate record and playback heads. Les proposed solving the problem by merging the heads into a single unit. Working with Ross Snyder to design an eight-track tape machine, the first multi-track recorder was built for Les by Ampex in 1957 and he ordered an eight-channel mixer from Rein Narma to go with it. Les Paul had, in effect, created the template for the modern recording studio.

Not all his projects worked out and his advice in an interview with Greg Hofmann was: "If you work on something and it's coming to you hard, shove it in the corner." Judging by the sheer quantity of dismantled instruments and non-functioning recording equipment deposited around his home after Les died, he meant it literally. In the same interview, published in January 1988, it's clear that Les had kept himself up to date. He offered prescient insights on synthesis and telling appraisals of hot-shots such as Eddie Van Halen, Al Di Meola and Stanley Jordan. However, his unyielding enthusiasm for low-impedance pickups remains largely unshared.

Although few listen to Les's music these days, his association with Gibson ensures his name will never be forgotten. Many of the practices he pioneered are just as relevant in the modern digital world as they were in the analogue era. Not bad for a lad from Waukesha, Wisconsin. **G**

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THE UK'S FIRST LES PAUL

THE '59 SOUND

We travel to London to meet storied rock guitarist Cosmo and the pride and joy of a lifetime of Les Paul collection – a Burst that may well have been the first of its kind to enter the UK…

WORDS HUW PRICE | **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

During his long career as a player with the likes of The Heavy Metal Kids, Curtis Knight, Andy Fraser and Phil Lynott among countless others, Cosmo has owned many historic instruments. It's also a distinct possibility that he's been playing vintage Les Pauls longer than practically anybody else in the UK, so catching up with him presents a rare opportunity to hear more about the pleasures and pitfalls of gigging and recording with some of the world's most desirable vintage guitars.

Right away, we're astonished to learn that Cosmo bought his first Burst in 1963, at the age of just 13 – and has never been without a vintage Les Paul since. "I've always played Bursts," he explains. "The first one I got from McCormack's Music in Glasgow. They weren't very popular then, but I just loved it and it felt great. It was only about £100, although that was a lot of money at the time. "A friend called Fraser Watson had one and he was in The Poets, The

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Bigsby
"TRUE VIBRATO"
PAYMENTS

Pathfinders and later, White Trash," Cosmo recalls. "It was the first '59 Burst I saw and played, and Fraser ended up selling it to his friend Danny Kirwan, around 1971.

"Before that, I had a '59 ES-335, but that Burst was it for me. The sound was similar, but bigger, and it was more comfortable. I never really changed from there on; it was either a Burst or a three-pickup Custom. Although I did have an affair with a '59 Flying V that lasted about 10 minutes."

'59 VARIETIES

For a brief period, Cosmo owned one of the most iconic Bursts. "Around 1971, I was offered the Keith Richards Burst with the Bigsby. The guy didn't want to just sell it to me, he actually wanted to swap it for a specific guitar. So, I went into Top Gear in Denmark Street and Sid Bishop managed to find me a '59 ES-175 with PAFs that the guy wanted. It was a good deal, but remember Bursts were only worth around £225 in '71.

"I kept the Keith Burst until mid 1974, when I damaged the neck. I dropped it and the neck slightly split up the back, but I was still playing it and it still stayed in tune. I ended up selling it to my mate Bernie Marsden, he then sold it and bought 'The Beast'."

An entirely different '59 Burst takes pride of place in Cosmo's collection today, and although he has only owned it for a short time, his association with the instrument goes back decades. "I was on tour with The Heavy Metal Kids and Humble Pie in 1973 and we were doing Green's Playhouse in Glasgow. Somebody told me that there was another Burst in town that was owned by an older guy who was a great jazzer and singer. I said I'd be interested in seeing it and he brought it over. I thought it looked a lot like the Keith one, because it had a Bigsby and they're only 20 digits apart. The owner's name was Tommy Gibson and although I tried offering him £500 that night, he didn't want to sell it. But over the years, we became friends and every year, I would try to buy it. Eventually, the zeros on the end began to build up and this went on for the next 30 years, until I moved house and lost Tommy's number."

Thankfully, fate intervened in the form of guitar-tech-to-the-stars, Alan Rogan. "He told me he thought the guitar had been offered to another collector. Fortunately, they hadn't agreed terms and then Tommy's son Craig found me through social media. He said Tommy had been looking for me and he was so upset, because he'd really wanted to sell me the guitar after all these years. The timing was good. I'm mates with Richie Sambora and I was going up to Glasgow the next day, as he was doing the O2. As we were staying in the same hotel, I was just hoping Richie wouldn't spot an old brown case come walking through reception! I took Tommy and Craig up to my room and I didn't even negotiate. I just paid Tommy his price. I showed it to Richie at dinner afterwards and as you can imagine, his eyes lit up."

The instrument's pot codes indicate the 42nd week of 1959. Because the US/UK trade embargo was only lifted at the end of '59, David Bower from Gibson UK is fairly sure the Tommy Burst was one of the first two Bursts in the UK. McCormack's took delivery of both at the beginning of 1960 and Tommy bought it at the end of March. "Sadly, nearly a year after buying it from Tommy, I got a phone call from Craig telling me that Tommy had passed away," Cosmo reveals.

Talks with Gibson Custom about producing a Collector's Choice recreation of the guitar reached advanced stages, but unfortunately it wasn't to be.

"I wanted them to call it the Tommy Burst or 'Glasgow Burst', in his memory," says Cosmo. "They said to me: 'Looking at this guitar, we've got the rare inverted flame, the guy who first bought it was

PREVIOUS PAGE Cosmo's 'Tommy Burst' revealed in all its heavenly glory

OPPOSITE TOP Like the Keith Burst, the Tommy Burst was fitted with a Selmer licenced Bigsby, which Cosmo removed and kept, of course. Note the seldom-seen original Selmer packaging

OPPOSITE BOTTOM With its 'poker chip' and pickguard removed, the effect of UV light on the original finish is revealed

ABOVE Much of the original 'Les Paul' silkscreen has worn away

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"IT'S A TOTAL MONSTER, BECAUSE IT HAS SUCH A BIG AND WIDE SOUND. IT'S SO CLEAR AND WHEN YOU'RE GOING FROM CHORDS TO LEAD, EVERY NOTE IS SO CLEAN"

ABOVE Aside from a refret and the removal of a Bigsby to reinstate its original stoptail, Cosmo has left the Tommy Burst unmodded

OPPOSITE TOP One of the PCAP-059 'bumblebee' tone capacitors in situ

OPPOSITE BOTTOM The Tommy Burst wears its history on its sleeve – or in this instance, on its scratchplate, where its jazz-playing custodian's fingers gradually warped the plastic over time. Hear Barrie Cadogan putting the guitar through its paces at youtube.com/theguitarmagazine

called Gibson and the serial number is 9-2222. You couldn't make this up.' I signed the contract – they decided to call the 'Gibson Burst', but that series was discontinued before it went into production."

Of all the Bursts we've encountered, none has played better than Cosmo's. Even so, it's clearly a guitar that has seen a lot of use. "It has been played to death," Cosmo agrees, "but the only thing I've done is remove the Bigsby and put its original stoptail and studs back on and had it re-fretted. The pickups and pots have never had a solder break and the pickup covers have never been off. It has a double white at the neck and zebra at the bridge. The Gibson guys loved the fingernail wear on the pickguard and neck-pickup surround. Tommy fitted a rare Bigsby around 1961 that Selmer made while under licence in the UK to distribute them. They look much like a standard B7, but are a few centimetres shorter, so the fixing screw could touch against the stud insert post for grounding. The Gibson guys hadn't seen another one and I even have the original box it came in."

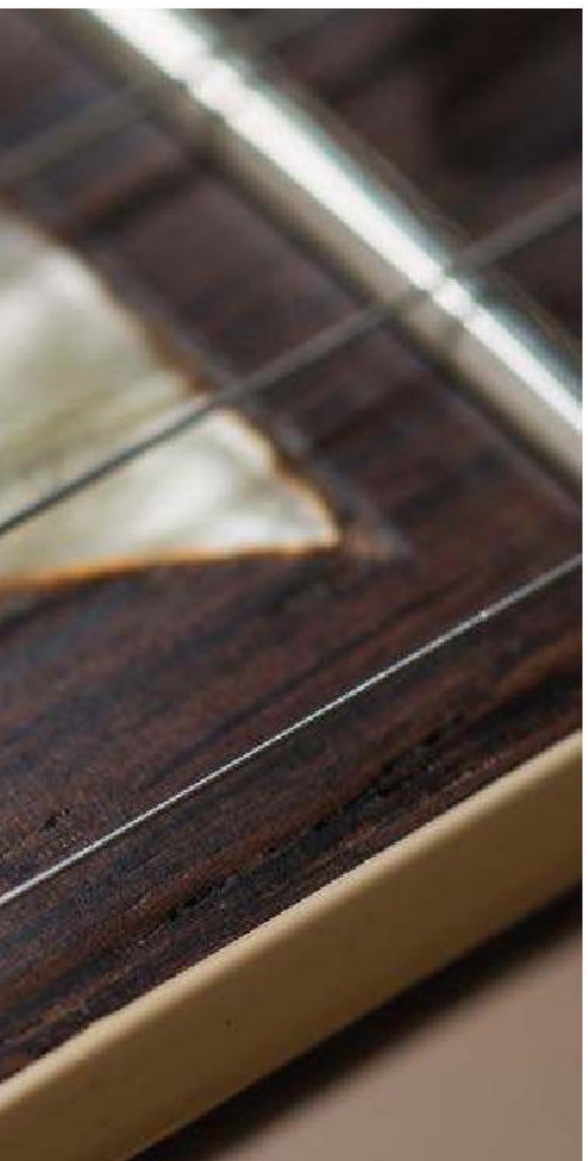
SOME KIND OF MONSTER

Since Cosmo has owned several Bursts, we ask how the Tommy Burst compares. "It's a total monster," he explains, "because it has such a big and wide sound. It's so clear and when you're going from chords to lead, every note is so clean and you don't have to adjust. If you throw in a break, it just comes out.

"You don't get that from reissues in the same way, or even 60s guitars. You don't even get that from all the Bursts. But I don't use pedals, so when I make a mistake, there's no hiding. That's the downside.

"Front pickups vary quite a lot as well," Cosmo tells us. "Some are so overpowering, and others balance quite nicely. When they're really good, they have that woody mellowness and harmonics, with the clarity. "

The debate about what makes Bursts special is never-ending, but we welcome the opportunity to compare notes with someone whose opinions are based on decades of experience of gigging and recording with the real thing. "The pickups do make a difference, but if you were to put these PAFs in a new guitar and any repro pickups you like in my guitar,



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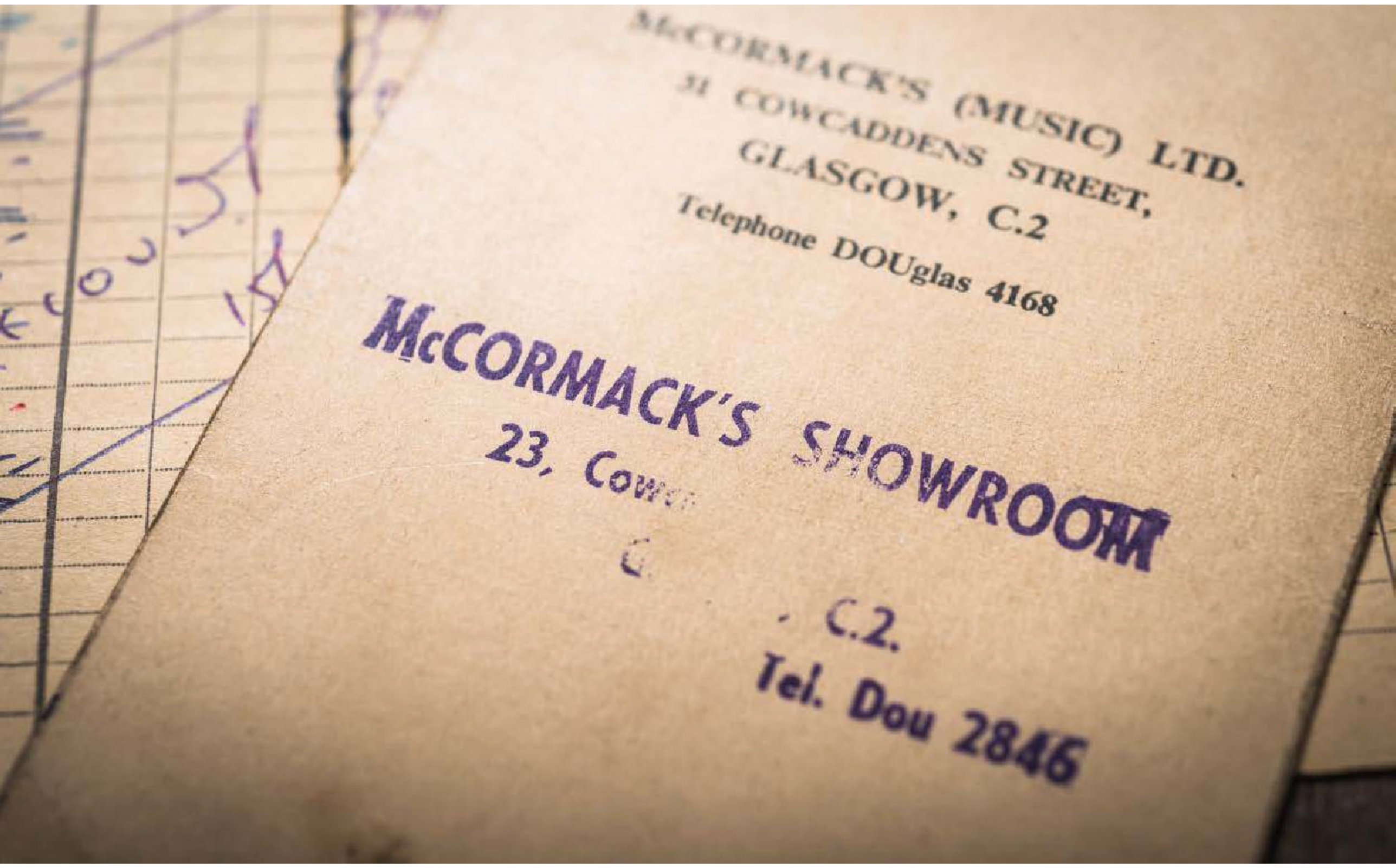
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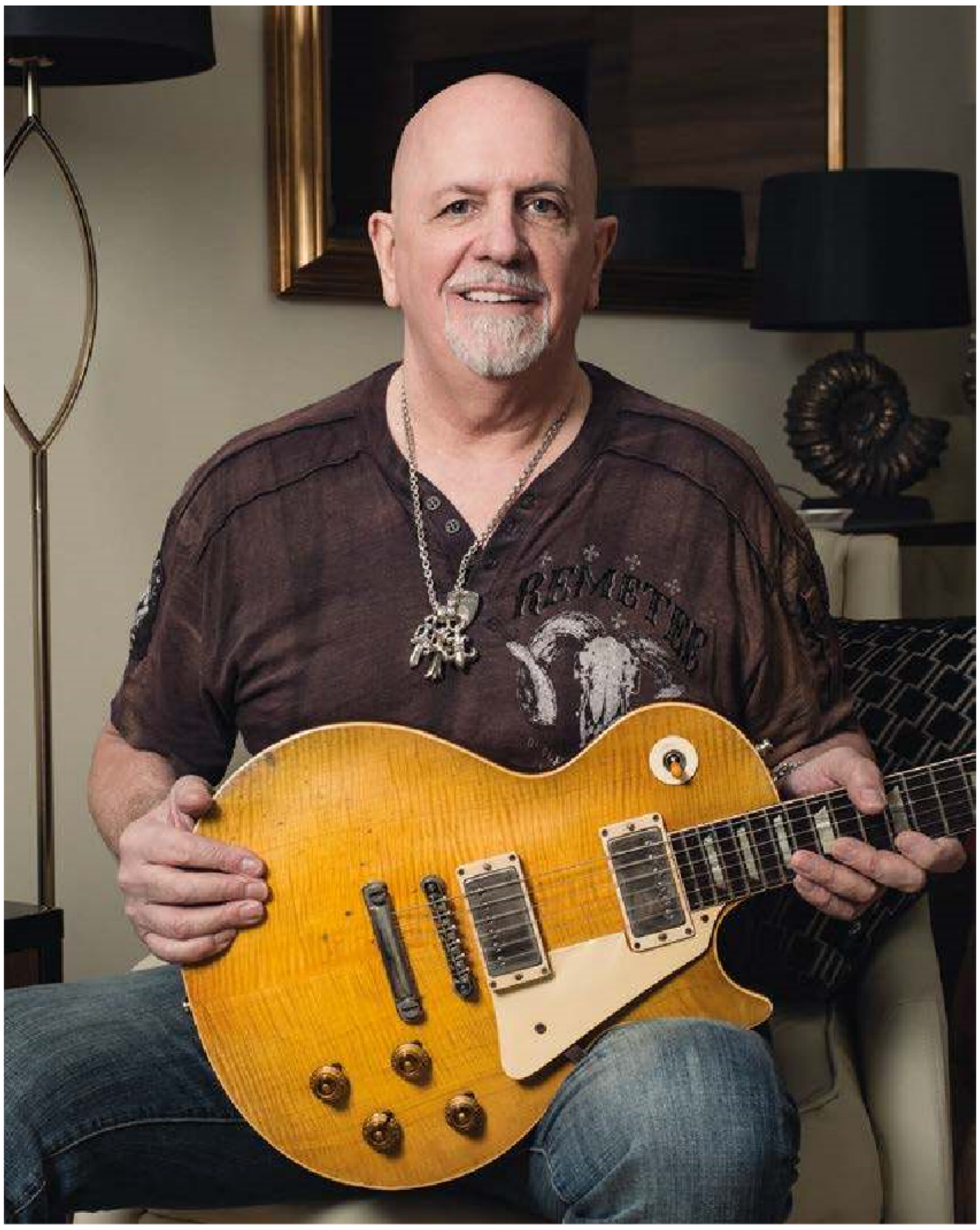

the old guitar is still going to sound better. It's the wood, and not all of them were made with the same wood. Mine has earthy reddish Honduran mahogany, but sometimes, the colour looks more gold and those don't sound as good. The earlier P-90 Goldtops tend to have the gold-colour mahogany, and even if you stick a couple of PAFs on them, they still don't come up to it. '58s tend to have the red mahogany and most of them sound really good, even if everybody wants a '59," Cosmo contends. "The Keith Burst and the 'Greeny' both have the red mahogany and they were all made close together in the 9-2000 batch – definitely the best by far, apart from a few '58s."

We wonder if Cosmo regards weight as a factor? "Heavier ones sound a bit harder," he observes, "which is fine if you want to play metal, but I prefer lighter ones. I don't believe Bursts sounded this good when they were new, because I feel the wood fuses over the years and gives you that harmonic effect. Some think it's the PAFs, but I think it's the wood. Just listen to the tone when it's unplugged, that says it all."

Despite being able to lay his hands on such stellar vintage instruments, pragmatism must occasionally prevail – and Cosmo sometimes plays a Les Paul replica, crafted by a renowned builder to his specs.

"I picked out every piece of wood on that guitar," Cosmo points out. "It's based on the Tommy Burst specs and even has the same asymmetrical neck profile. It's got 50s PAFs, pots and Bumble Bees. The bridge is a 1960 ABR-1, because the retaining wire makes sense and it has a vintage tailpiece, scratchplate and knobs. The rings are his own replicas. I have to say, it sounds better than a lot of real Bursts. I have to look down sometimes to see what guitar I'm playing. With that one, it's easy to forget."

> **"I DON'T BELIEVE BURSTS SOUNDED THIS GOOD WHEN THEY WERE NEW, BECAUSE I FEEL THE WOOD FUSES OVER THE YEARS AND GIVES YOU THAT HARMONIC EFFECT"**

VINTAGE TROUBLE

Our time with Cosmo concludes with a topic that's seldom discussed among originality-obsessed vintage-guitar enthusiasts – namely that we are dealing with very old guitars and many are showing signs of wear and tear. "What I've noticed in the last 10 years or so with a lot of vintage Les Pauls, is that the fingerboards have been so badly shot during various re-frets that it results in insufficient clearance between the strings and pickups when trying to set a comfortably low action," Cosmo explains. "You can usually tell how much has been taken off the 'board by the amount of brownness showing through the inlays. Some guitars have ended up with uncomfortably high action, just for the strings to clear the pickups. Other than back-veneering the original 'board and losing the original binding in the process, the only other solution is to take the 'board off a scrapped '55 or '56 Goldtop, if you can find one. It has to be from those years, because those 'boards are the only P-90 models with the right length.

"My luthier Andy Warnock has also had to pop glue under the 'boards of several Bursts and Goldtops because the 'boards are about to fall off," Cosmo recalls, as he relates a cautionary tale for any prospective vintage Les Paul buyer. "I remember we first spotted this problem many years ago. It was a guitar that I'd had re-fretted a couple of times and it just wasn't playing right. Andy started tapping on the 'board and realised that it was moving. He slid a blade under one end and the 'board just popped right off, with the binding intact. He reglued the 'board and the guitar was perfect. When you're looking at any vintage Gibson, you might just want to check that the 'board is still firmly attached…" **G**

ABOVE Cosmo's love of Bursts has brought him into contact with many of the most famous examples of the breed

OPPOSITE
The original sales documentation from the Tommy Burst shows it was one of the first two such guitars in the UK

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STAR GUITARS

PAUL KOSSOFF/ERIC CLAPTON 1955 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM

What's even better than a golden era Les Paul that was once owned by a rock 'n' roll icon? One that was owned by two…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Collector Matthieu Lucas has treated us to a close-up look at some spectacular guitars in these pages already. Yet if the '59 on page 8 wasn't impressive enough, the next instrument to be removed from its case and placed gently on the tiled floor of Matt's 17th-century home for our perusal was owned by a teenage Paul Kossoff prior to Free, and quite possibly traded with Eric Clapton and played onstage with Cream in 1967.

Kossoff apparently scraped the yellowed lacquer off the binding of the then-10-year-old guitar to restore it to its original white appearance and blacked out the 'Les Paul Custom' legend on the truss-rod cover. He also wrote his name on stickers that he stuck to the underside of the control and switch cavity plates.

"When we started doing business, we tried that guitar maybe like five years ago," remembers Matt. "We went to see the guitar, but we didn't have the money. Then last December, another guy was selling it and we figured it out. It's a '55 Black Beauty bought by Paul Kossoff's father in the USA and he brought it back to his son in London.

"There are pictures of Kossoff with short hair, 15 or 16 years old, playing that guitar," Matt continues. "He was playing it with Black Cat Bones before Free. He was trading a lot with Eric Clapton and you can see a picture of Clapton with that very same guitar in 1967 in Cream. The guitar initially came from Eric Clapton's tour manager."

It's a guitar with the blues in its DNA and a very special one for Matt. "I'm a huge Paul Kossoff fan," he says. "When I discovered his music, I understood the genetic link between BB King, Paul Kossoff and Angus Young, with that vibrato. That was really important for me; after five years thinking I could never buy the guitar, I'm very happy to own it." **G**

To see more of Matt's guitars, visit mattsguitar.shop

ABOVE Free legend Paul Kossoff owned this guitar in early band Black Cat Bones and he left his mark on stickers left in the cavities; Eric Clapton also used the guitar for a time

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

GOLD STANDARD

The chance to get your hands on one of the the first Les Pauls ever made doesn't come along very often. So when Rob Francis had the opportunity, to own a '52 Goldtop, he seized it and brought it back to Blighty, where we got up close and personal…

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

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Gibson

MAYBE GIBSON AND LES PAUL WERE A LITTLE TOO SWAYED BY THE SUCCESS OF THE TELECASTER. LES KEPT A '51 NOCASTER GIVEN TO HIM BY LEO FENDER UNTIL HIS DEATH

The recession of 2008 had a significant impact on every aspect of our society and the vintage guitar market was no different – values of historic instruments tumbled for the first time in years and it meant there were great deals to be had, if you could find them. Rob Francis was one such clever speculator, and it's remarkable to learn that he managed to pick up this original 1952 Les Paul Standard for roughly the same price that you'd pay for one of Gibson's Tom Murphy-aged True Historic reissues today.

Having spotted the guitar for sale in a small shop in Virginia, Rob bought it and had it shipped to a friend in LA where he was able to pick it up while there on a work assignment.

As a professional photographer, Rob has learned to be extremely cautious with his equipment over the years, but a moment of absentmindedness could have parted him from his prize before he even managed to get it home…

Rob was driving back to the airport with the Goldtop when he realised that he needed to fill his car up with gas, and so he pulled over at a service station in a rather insalubrious part of town. As the locals stocked up on snacks and drinks, Rob queued for about 15 minutes to pay for his gas, oblivious to the fact that he'd left the car unlocked and unattended with the Cali Girl case sat in plain view on the back seat.

AWKWARD MARRIAGE

On reflection, he was very fortunate that an opportunistic thief didn't happen by and pilfer the guitar – or maybe the thief in question was a vintage obsessive and didn't think it was worth the trouble for a '52?

This isn't a knock on the Goldtop – it's an amazing guitar – but the fact is that while 50s Les Pauls are some of the most collectable instruments around, not all 50s Les Pauls are considered equal by vintage obsessives.

There are two features of the 1952 models that mean they're less loved than some of its brethren – a very shallow one-degree neck angle and the trapeze tailpiece. As a result, the '52 has a reputation as being more of a collector's curio than a potential workhorse instrument, and the market value reflects this.

The neck angle issue does rather beggar belief when you consider that Gibson had been making premium guitars since the 19th century – the basic geometry of matching a neck to an archtop body would have been well understood, so why did they deviate from tried and trusted guitar-building practice? We may never know for sure, but a tentative hypothesis is that maybe Gibson and Les Paul were a little too swayed by the success of the Fender Telecaster. It's well known that Les kept a '51 Nocaster gifted to him by Leo Fender until his death, so perhaps the intent was to give the Gibson Les Paul a more Fender-like feel by levelling out the neck-to-body transition.

Indeed, that would have been a fine idea if Gibson had paired it with a new bridge design. Instead, Les Paul insisted that his guitar should use the trapeze tailpiece/bridge unit that he had designed. Now, the trapeze worked perfectly with the ES-295 and ES-225, but it was incompatible with that shallow neck angle.

As a result, players had to wrap strings under the bridge to achieve a playable action, which made palm muting very hard and players would surely have

OPPOSITE The headstock logo is a clue that this is one of the earliest Les Pauls, as the dot of the 'i' on the Gibson logo is touching the 'G'

ABOVE The original bridge has been replaced with a mystery uniit – possibly a 1967 Teisco – that fits the original tailpiece studs

ABOVE Devil in the details – interestingly, the guitar has '666' stamped into the back of the headstock

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The green colour is verdigris, which is caused by copper in the gold colour oxidising

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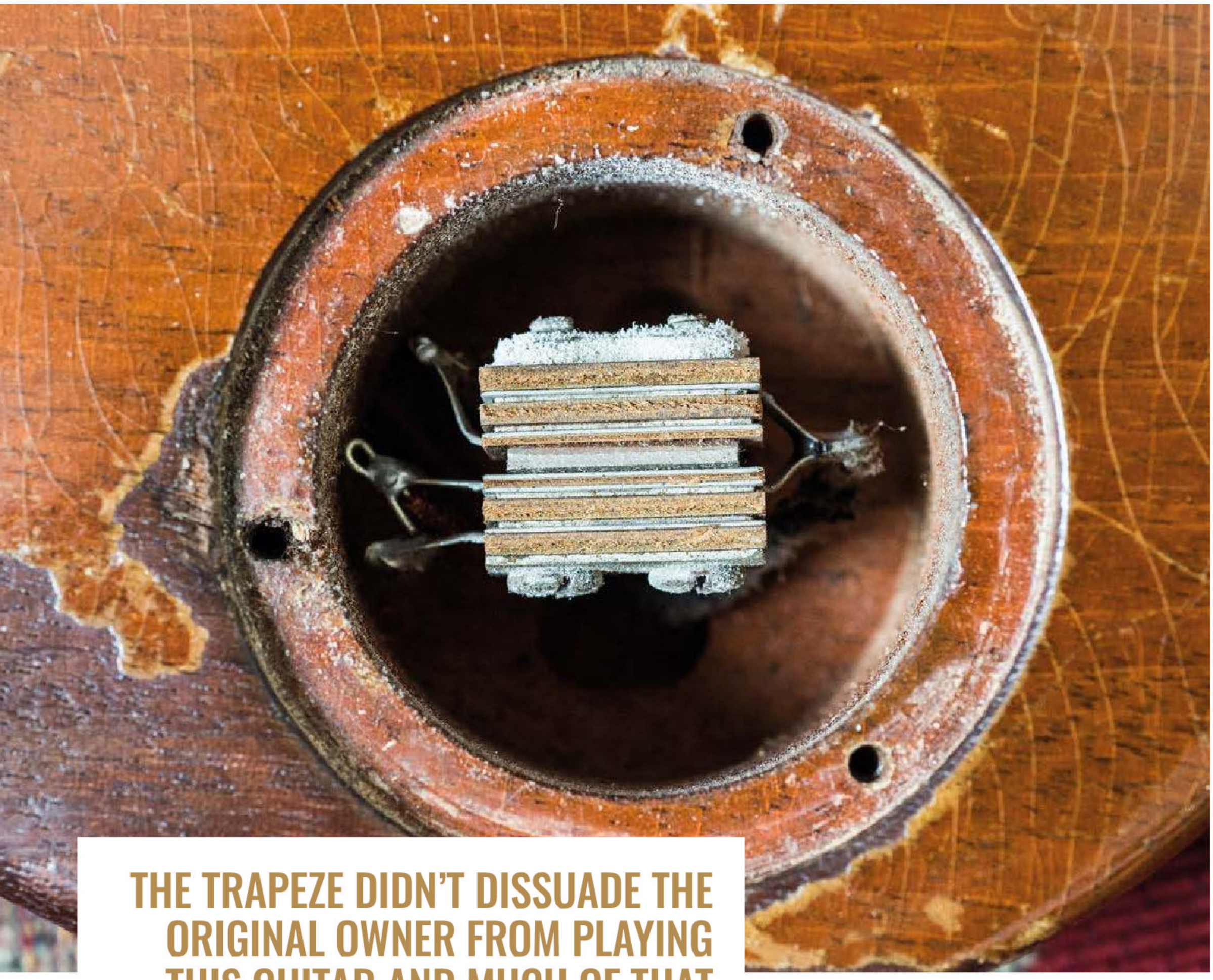

THE TRAPEZE DIDN'T DISSUADE THE ORIGINAL OWNER FROM PLAYING THIS GUITAR AND MUCH OF THAT PLAYING WAS DONE WITH THE ORIGINAL TAILPIECE IN SITU

found the protruding metal parts uncomfortable and obstructive. Moreover, the tailpiece had a tendency to slide around if the strings were hit too hard due to the insufficient downward pressure.

It's hard not to feel like the guys at Gibson were out of their comfort zone when creating this guitar. Les Paul had plenty of ideas of his own and expressed them forcefully. Gibson was a fairly conservative company and you imagine that some of the highly skilled and experienced employees there would have been sceptical of the solidbody concept, or regarded Les as an interloper. While we doubt this meant that anyone was trying to undermine the Les Paul guitar, this first incarnation's various incompatibilities do suggest that it was designed by committee.

HARD ROAD

So the trapeze compromises playability, but it certainly didn't dissuade the original owner from playing this guitar and much of that playing was done with the original tailpiece in situ. The original plating has worn away across the tailpiece's top surface and you can see marks under the bridge where the strings have cut into the metal.

Somewhere along the line, presumably when an owner decided to fit a Bigsby, the bridge was changed. Holes were drilled for conventional stud bushings and a wrapover tailpiece was added. Clearly this wouldn't have worked with the shallow neck angle, so the bridge base was skimmed to drop the action to a playable level. The aluminium tailpiece that came with this guitar is vintage and most likely a pre-1955 thin-eared example. As a result of the skimming, cracks have appeared in the vicinity of the intonation setscrews and it would be inadvisable to re-install it.

At first, Rob used a relic'd B7 with the wrapover tailpiece but changed to a bridge of a mystery brand (possibly a 1967 Teisco) that he mounted using the Gibson tailpiece studs. As well as allowing individual string intonation, the bridge's most unusual feature is side-to-side saddle adjustment. This proved handy, as whoever added the Bigsby had mounted it off centre.

Existing Bigsby holes were part of the attraction for Rob when he bought this guitar, but he had

no intention of drilling any others and the Teisco's sideways saddle adjustment provided a solution for realigning the strings without relocating the Bigsby. The Bigsby now residing on the guitar is another internet find and is purportedly a late 1950s original that had been fitted to an ES-335.

Rob considers this the perfect set-up for his guitar, and he likes to think that Les Paul would have approved. After all, he was a practical and pragmatic man who generally favoured a properly functioning lash up over fine but flawed craftsmanship. Les was partial to a bit of Bigsby action, too and he reputedly gouged into the top of his first LP prototype with a heated screwdriver in order to lower the trapeze sufficiently for top wrapping.

Les Pauls from the first year of production are not as rare as you might imagine. Supposedly only around 1,500 Les Paul Standards were made between 1958 and 1960, but company records show that Gibson sold 1,716 Goldtops in 1952 alone. Considering that the first ones didn't reach the dealers until June, that was going some. Unfortunately, Gibson's records don't specify how many of those '52s had unbound necks. However, unbound 1952 Goldtops are definitely in the minority and Rob's guitar has some other unusual features that indicate it's one of the very first Les Pauls ever made.

As such, it is a particularly rare example. Examine the headstock and you'll see there is no serial number, and the Gibson logo is set low on the peghead. Look closely at the logo and check out how the low-set 'kissing dot' touches the 'G'.

Now look down the neck and you'll notice the Brazilian rosewood fingerboard has no binding and the side dots are white plastic. The ones on this guitar have been touched up – presumably because the originals had almost vanished through discolouration. These very early Goldtops also had 0.63-inch-tall barrel knobs rather than the later 0.5-inch knobs, and they predate the poker chips under the selector switch.

Telltale screw holes reveal that Schallers were fitted at some point, but the original 'no-line' Kluson tuners are back on the guitar. The tuner buttons have all been changed and it's probable that hex bushings would originally have been fitted. Fortunately, the original pickup covers remain and diagonal screws were used to attach the bridge pickup to the body.

You get the sense that Gibson was still trying to figure out how to build these guitars – in much the same way that the earliest Strats were clearly a work in progress. The bridge-pickup screws are a case in point, because they show that Gibson hadn't settled on the best way to locate the wiring channels.

On this guitar, the wires vanish under the maple cap in the centre of the pickup rout, which precluded the use of body screws between the polepieces. At the bottom of the switch cavity, it looks like a bit of freehand routing has been performed to achieve the necessary thickness for the switch and the control cavity has square sides rather than the later 'clover leaf' shape. In the photos, you can see the ground wire is routed to the tailpiece rather than bridge posts and the pickup wires enter from the top rather than the sides of the cavity. All the potentiometers and both grey tiger capacitors appear original and the solder joints seem untouched.

Sadly, the '52 pickguard is long gone, but this 1955 or '56 one isn't such a bad replacement. The giveaway is the gap around the bridge-pickup cover's front edge, because Gibson narrowed the spacing between the two pickups from 3.13 inches to three inches in 1955.

The gold finish seems very slightly thinner than on a 1954 Goldtop, for example. It was applied over a thin clear base coat that is exposed in the arm wear area. Some of clear coat has worn away in this area and the wood has oxidised. Much of the gold is gone from the upper bout and in places, the remaining lacquer looks like metallic shards.

Most of the verdigris is confined to the bass side of the body, but it's far from excessive and while you can feel the texture of green lines under your

OPPOSITE It looks as though a bit of freehand routing has been performed on the switch cavity to make the switch fit

ABOVE TOP The diagonal screws on the bridge pickup show how Gibson was still working out the best way to do things at this early stage

ABOVE These very early Goldtops also had 0.63-inch-tall barrel knobs rather than the later 0.5-inch ones

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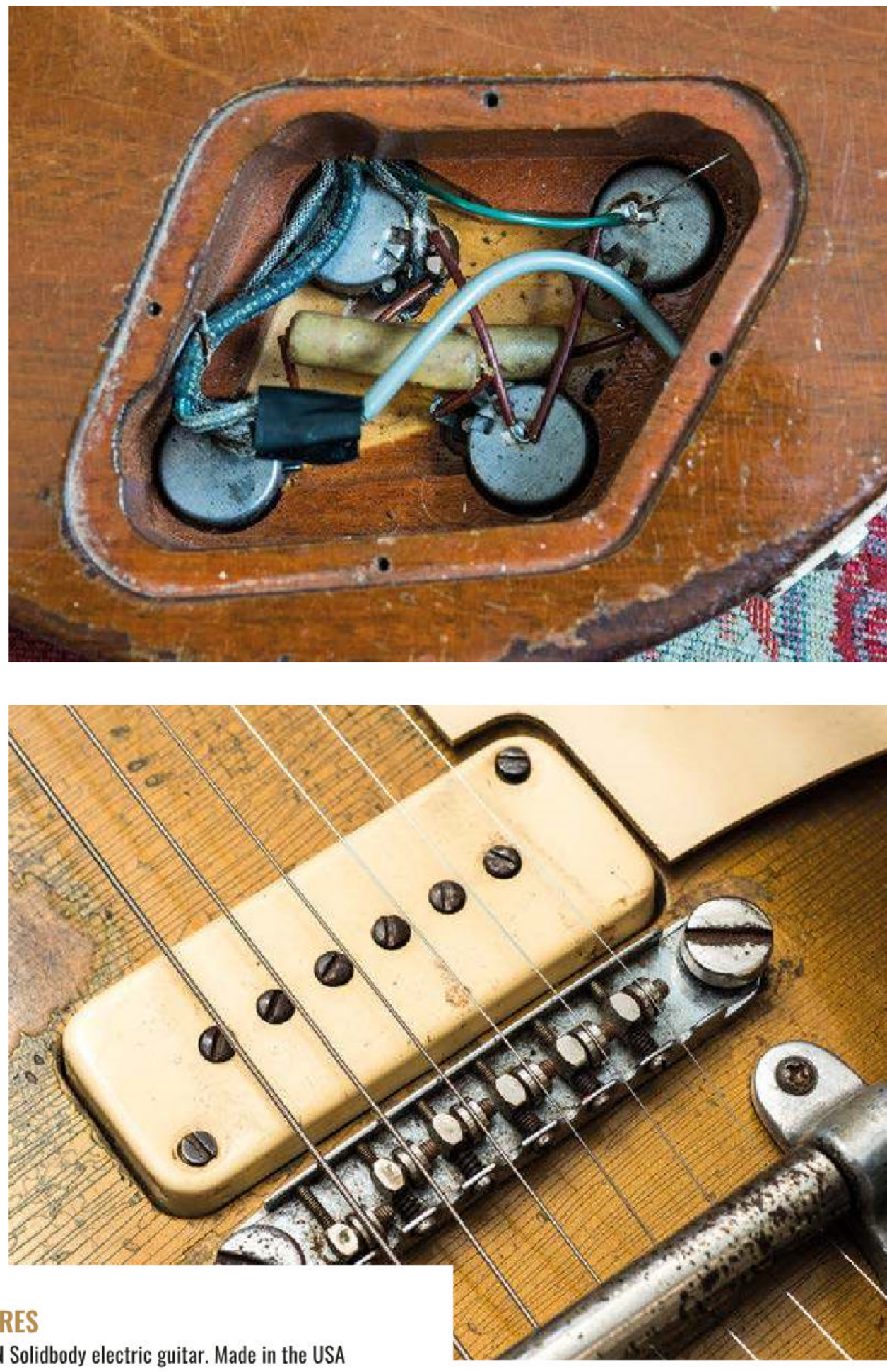

fingers, they're not as raised as on other 50s Les Paul Goldtops we've encountered. The back of the body and the neck both show extensive playwear and fairly heavy checking consistent with marks under the scratchplate and on the metal parts.

IN USE

We've encountered two other '52 Goldtops over the years – the first being so derelict that we can't really comment on any qualities it may have had once restored. Asides from a well-repaired neck break, the other was in very clean and original condition and its neck profile made a lasting impression. Rob's '52 is equally impactful – the neck is quite different to the deeper and rounder profiles we've encountered on 1954 and 1957 Goldtops. It's surprisingly slim, and gives an overall vibe of sophistication and comfort.

The crisply carved headstock ears curve into a soft V that graduates seamlessly into a more rounded C as you move towards the body. It's anything but clubby and while LPs from the mid-to-late 1950s can have a chunky and formidable feel, this guitar feels faster, more delicate and svelte.

Given how much this guitar was played, it's hardly surprising the nut and the frets have been changed. Fortunately, a pretty decent job was made of it and it's good to see that jumbo wire wasn't installed. The original wire would have been quite skinny and quite possibly low, but this is medium-gauge wire and it's high enough to dig under the strings for bends and vibrato.

Unplugged, it sounds very balanced with plenty of clarity and depth. Like the similarly heavy 1954 it's not especially deep and bassy, but it's massively resonant and sustaining with a ringing brightness and chime.

Through an amp, this guitar does things Les Pauls shouldn't really do. It's exceptionally clear

KEY FEATURES

DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Mahogany body with maple cap, set mahogany neck with unbound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard
HARDWARE, No-line Kluson tuners with replaced buttons, aftermarket Teisco bridge and B7 Bigsby
ELECTRICS Two P-90 pickups, two volumes, two tones, 3-way selector switch
FINISH Metallic gold on top with clear nitrocellulose neck, back and sides
SCALE LENGTH 628mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 23.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.64kg/10.23lbs

ABOVE LEFT The frets have been replaced, but a good job was done and the thin wire was retained

ABOVE TOP The control cavity has square sides rather than the later 'clover leaf' shape

ABOVE The bridge pickup still has the original diagonal screws that attached it to the guitar's body

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The ’52 has a shallow neck angle that made the guitar very difficult to play with the original tailpiece

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Bigsby
PATENT
No. 2,169,120

and defined, with powerchords having a piano-like richness. Note-to-note separation is truly exceptional, yet the transient attack has a slight softness that could be attributable to the weaker early 50s magnets and there's never even a hint of harshness.

Maybe it's due to the wider pickup spacing, but the tonal contrast between the two pickups is marked. The bridge does a sweet kerrang and roar, but it also has a wiry twang on the low strings and a subtle bite in the treble. There is a hint of cocked wah in the upper mids from both pickups and although there is some quackiness, it provides character without being too prominent.

The neck pickup is far smoother and jazzier than the bridge. Single notes have a full and rounded quality that translates to a distinctly vocal 'ooh' as you play further up the neck. The almost uncanny cleanup capability is there with both pickups from 10 to one, and the control pots have a smooth and noise-free response – with the exception of the slightly scratchy neck tone.

The in-between position produces a sublime rockabilly-meets-Chet type of tone with the sort of hi-fi clarity that compares to a DeArmond-loaded Gretsch. Roll back the bridge volume a tad and with a hint of overdrive, the tone takes on a horn-like quality that would be superb for jump-blues soloing and brassy stabs.

The action is perhaps a tad higher than it could be, but it's such an easy guitar to play you soon stop noticing. It's a mystery why anybody considered it necessary to change the tuners, because even with vigorous Bigsby activity, the tuning remains stable.

Had 1952 Les Pauls been fitted with a different bridge, the neck angle would have worked and had it been used with a steeper neck angle, the tailpiece would have been fine.

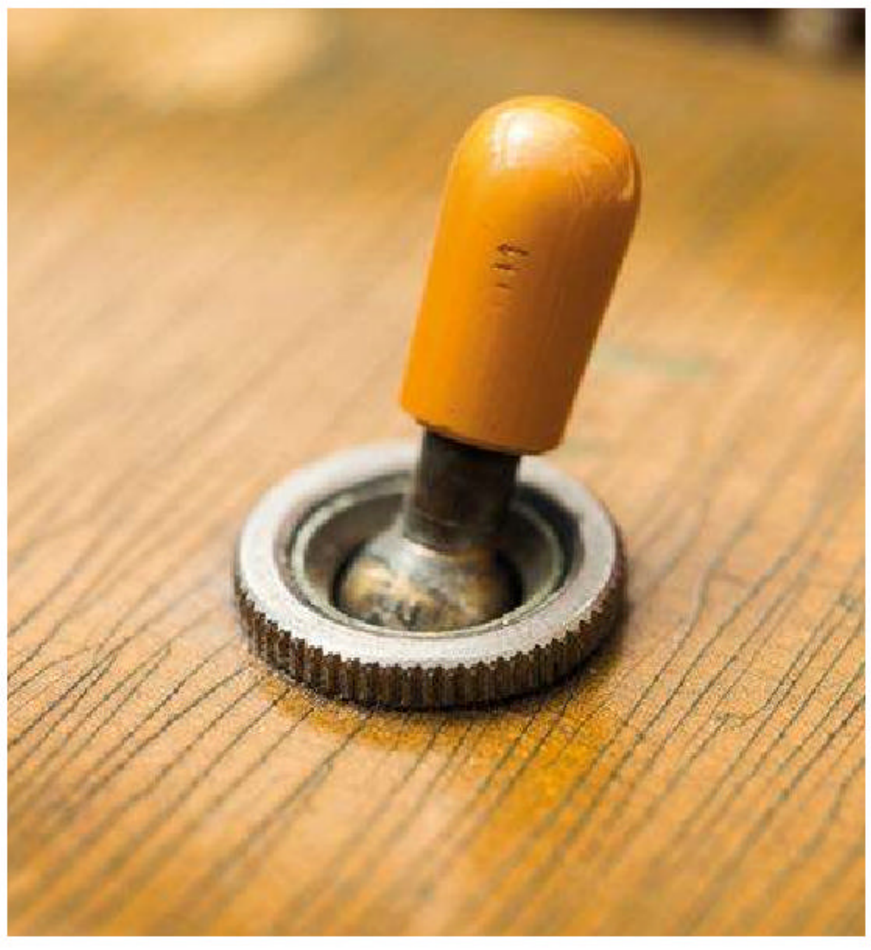
Since it's such a tough job to re-set a Les Paul neck, it makes sense to change the bridge and various options are now available that can turn a '52 into a fully playable instrument with low action and improved intonation. The Glaser, Crazy Pig and Mojoaxe tailpieces will all attach to an original trapeze and the mods are fully reversible. So the neck angle is a non-issue – yet 1952 models remain the most affordable of 1950s Les Pauls.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

If we were to choose three words to describe this guitar's tone, we'd go with 'clear', 'versatile' and 'big'. This is the type of guitar that never gets dull or boring, because fresh tones and textures keep emerging and the neck is such a delight, you simply don't want to put it down.

It would be hard decision indeed to choose between a '52 and the '54, but on balance, there's some indefinable magic in the earlier guitar's pickups that just edges it. **G**

IF WE WERE TO CHOOSE THREE WORDS TO DESCRIBE THIS GUITAR'S TONE, WE'D GO WITH 'CLEAR', 'VERSATILE' AND 'BIG'. FRESH TONES AND TEXTURES KEEP EMERGING



ABOVE The guitar has its original Kluson tuners back, but Schallers were fitted at some point

LEFT The original switch ring is gone, but you can make out the outline of where it was

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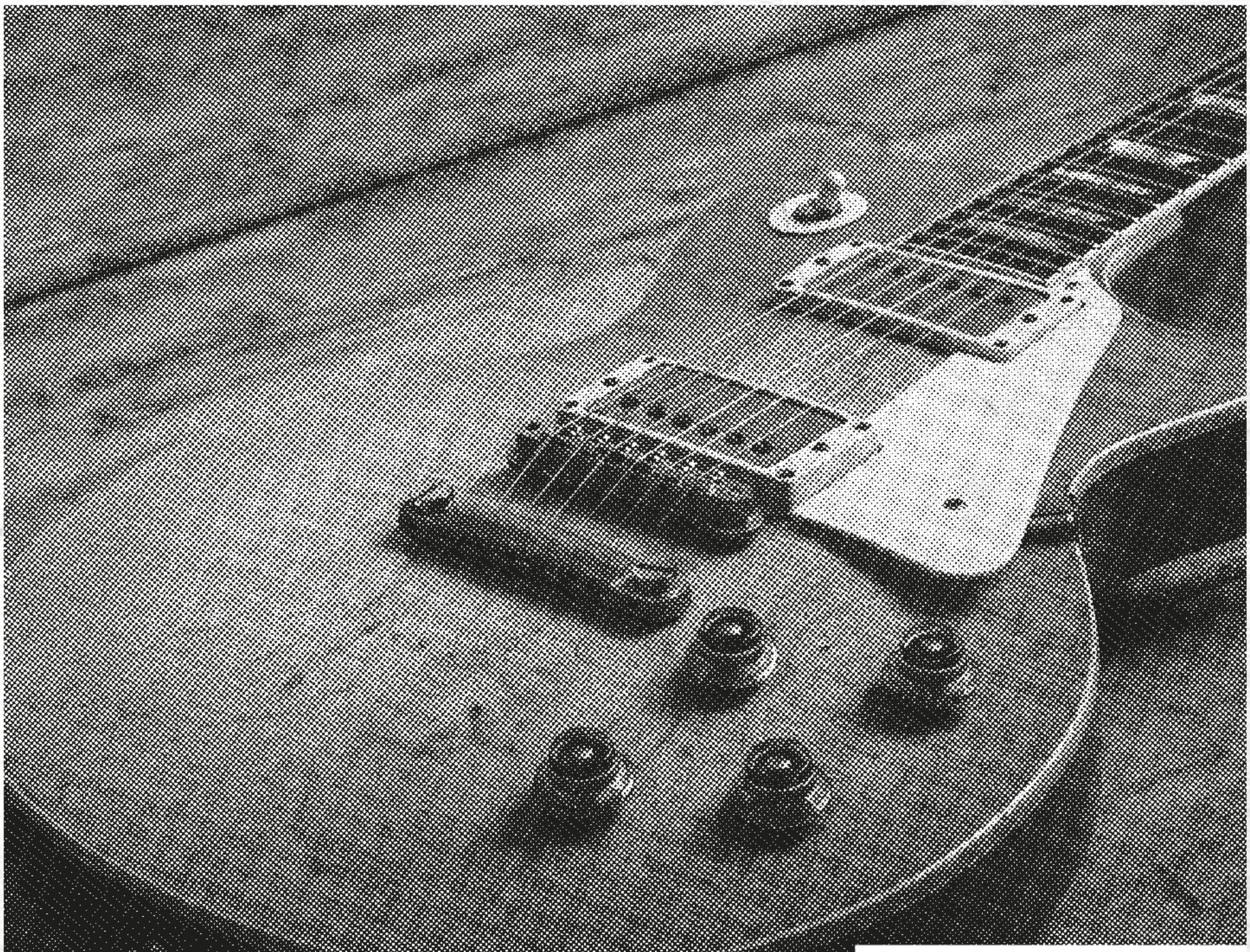
LOVE YOUR LES PAUL

Whether your Les Paul is a sticker-covered, blood-splattered road warrior or a much-cherished heirloom, one thing's for sure: sooner or later, every guitar needs a little TLC. Before you pick up the phone and arrange an expensive trip to the luthier, this list of simple fixes, mods, upgrades and general maintenance tips might save you some money and help you sound better into the bargain…

WORDS HUW PRICE, CHRIS VINNICOMBE, JOSH GARDNER



DISCLAIMER If in doubt, we always recommend seeking out an experienced guitar tech and please proceed with extreme caution when it comes to vintage instruments – modifications can devalue your guitar in the eyes of collectors. All that said, if you can operate a screwdriver and a soldering iron and have the patience, there's often no reason why you can't have a go yourself. Write in and let us know how you get on!

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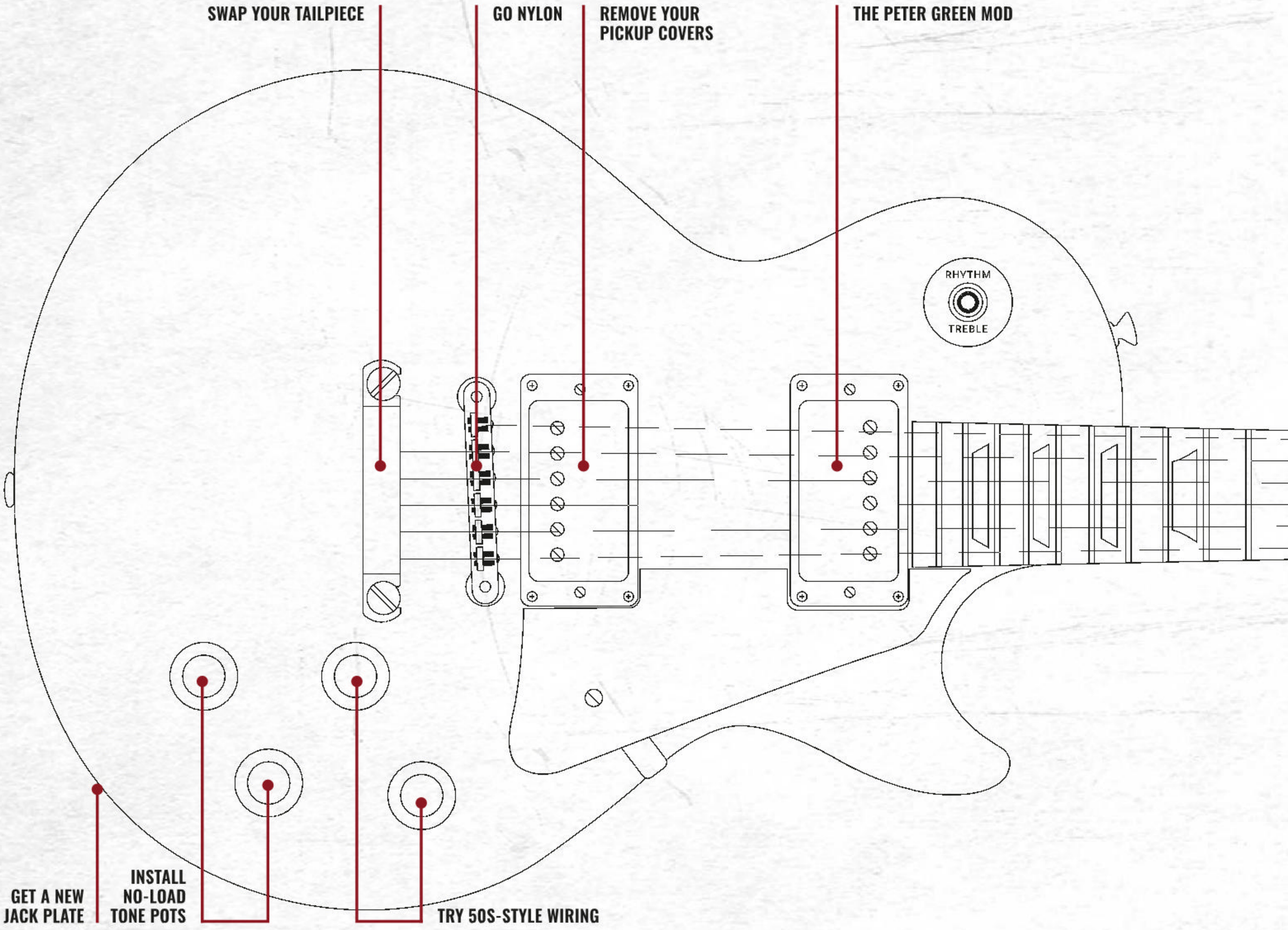


1 REMOVE YOUR PICKUP COVERS

This is one of the earliest modifications players performed on their humbucker-equipped Gibsons. It was generally thought at the time that removing the covers made the pickups sound louder. In fact, players who removed their covers were probably just hearing a little more treble, because the capacitive effect of the covers caused high-frequency roll-off. Loose covers can also be a cause of microphonic feedback. Vintage nickel-silver covers were very thin and kept treble loss to a minimum, but later covers – especially thick brass ones – did the upper frequency response no favours.

2 GET A NEW JACK PLATE

Every guitar design has its weak spots and the jack plate is the Les Paul's – because the slim plastic plate is all too easy to snap. The solution to this dilemma is simple, however: fit a metal replacement. This is a cheap and reversible modification, but try to ensure the screw holes of the new plate will line up with the old one. If you want to keep the original look, simply install the plastic plate on top of the metal one.

3 THE PETER GREEN MOD

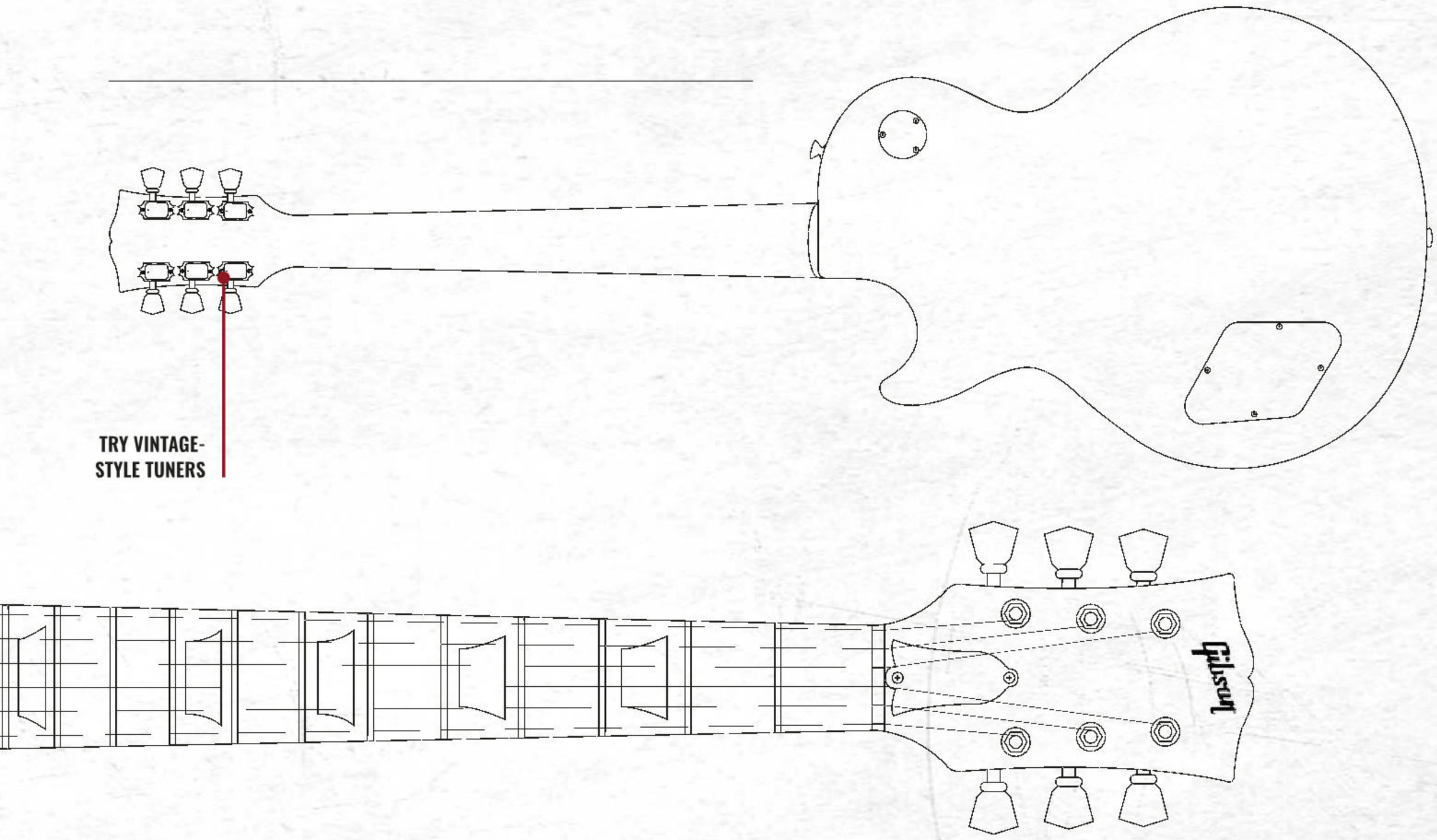
During his time with Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green's Les Paul had a very distinctive sound in the middle position. There are two ways you can replicate this. After removing the cover of one pickup (we'd suggest the neck), slacken off the baseplate, slide out the magnet then flip it around (not over) to reverse the magnetic polarity relative to the coil. Tighten the baseplate up, refit your cover if you use one, and you're done. Alternatively, you can flip the phase electronically by reversing the hot and cold connections.

4 BECOME A TOP WRAPPER

In addition to providing an anchor point for the strings, the stop tailpiece ensures that the strings have a suitable break-angle over the saddles. However, when the tailpiece is screwed tight to the body, the angle might be too sharp, increasing the chances of string breakage. One solution is to feed the strings through the tailpiece from the pickup side and wrap them over the top of the tailpiece. Proponents – among them Joe Bonamassa – claim that you get the tonal benefits of tailpiece-to-body contact coupled with more sustain and a slinkier playing feel, akin to swapping a set of 11s for a set of 10.5s.

5 TRY 50S-STYLE WIRING

If you own a soldering iron, this is one of the simplest and cheapest mods around. They call it '50s wiring' because it's the way Gibson hooked things up until around 1962 and the only actual difference was that the company connected the tone control to the output (middle) tag of the volume control rather than the input (outer) tag. This means you can turn down your volume control without the sound muddying up quite so much, and the volume and tone controls also become more interactive.



6 SWAP YOUR TAILPIECE

In the 1950s, Gibson's stop tailpiece was originally made from aluminium. Later on, this changed to zinc, which remains stock on many current models. Some players claim aluminium gives extra woodiness and more treble with a wider dynamic range, while zinc fans argue that their preferred metal has more low end and sustain. You can get a lightweight aluminium one for around £30, so do the Pepsi Challenge.

7 INSTALL NO-LOAD TONE POTS

A lack of clarity and treble is a common Les Paul complaint, but if you don't want to change your pickups, you can still get some of that treble back when you need it. With any tone control, there's always some treble bleed through the tone circuit – you can test this and see for yourself by disconnecting the tone circuit from the volume control. So try a 'no load' tone pot, which will enable you to eliminate the pot from circuit at the twist of a knob, and thus eliminate treble bleed? You can buy them or even make your own, and you'll notice the biggest difference in the neck position.

8 LOCK DOWN YOUR TAILPIECE

Traditional tailpiece studs do not grip stop tailpieces at all – the only thing holding the tailpiece in position is the pull of the strings. Often, you'll see tailpieces tilting forward, and it's claimed that better tone can be achieved by fixing the tailpiece more securely. TonePros (tonepros.com) and Faber (faberguitars.com) both offer retrofit means of getting your studs to grip.

9 GO NYLON

1950s Les Pauls sported nylon nuts. While a vintage-accurate 6/6-grade nylon nut is expensive, you could always try it at the other end. To minimise rattle and vibrations, Gibson was using nylon saddles on several models by the mid 1960s. These days, you can easily try swapping out your saddles – it's an affordable and reversible mod. Reducing friction is always a good idea if your Les Paul has a Bigsby, while nylon saddles also have a softer attack and sweeter high end than brass or steel. Some players – Mr Bonamassa included – have been known to try a half rice/half chips approach with metal saddles for the wound strings and nylon for the plain strings. Experiment!

10 GIVE US A KLUSON

Most original Bursts associated with big-name players have diecast tuners – with the exception of Billy Gibbons' Pearly Gates. Taking a Black & Decker to the headstock of a vintage LP may seem horrific nowadays, but diecast tuners require wider holes than Klusons and players were more concerned with keeping their guitars in tune than originality. Increased mass at the headstock may have enhanced sustain, too.

Nowadays, players are equally likely to retrofit vintage-style tuners, but you'll need conversion bushes to do it. You'll get vintage looks and livelier dynamics – and, contrary to vintage lore, decent Kluson-style tuners hold their tuning just as well as diecasts. G

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SLASH

THE GUITAR INTERVIEW

Saul Hudson is the most iconic Les Paul player of the last 30 years, maybe ever. The last few years have been some of the most eventful in Slash's remarkable career. After decades of acrimony he took to the stage with Guns N' Roses again, the brand with which he's become synonymous went to the brink of oblivion and back – and finally, he closed in on the 10 years of his solo project.

With so much to talk about, we caught up with the guitarist to find out how it felt to step back onstage with GN'R, what went wrong at Gibson, his newfound love of P-90 pickups and how somehow, he's still a self-conscious guitar player…

WORDS JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

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ABOVE, FACING PAGE Slash with Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators at the Eventim Apollo in Hammersmith, London in February 2019

Slash is in a good mood. "We've been having what I would consider one of the most fun European tours that we've ever had," the guitarist tells us, on a day off between tour dates with Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators in Milan and Toulouse. "It's been very well received and all the gigs have been sold out, so it's cool!"

Despite spending the last few years juggling his solo project with the small matter of the most hyped and successful rock 'n' roll reunion tour in history, he seems in a relaxed place, in no small part because of the balance his hectic schedule offers.

"Guns N' Roses is just this big epic thing," the 53-year-old explains. "The Conspirators is on a lower scale, which keeps you grounded for sure!"

Despite keeping him on the level, the demands of the highest-grossing tour of all time haven't given Slash much chance to spend time with his new solo album *Living The Dream* since it was released last year, something that he's finally getting a chance to rectify: "Y'know, you just get so used to flying by the seat of your pants, you just adapt quickly!" he says of his hectic schedule. "You go in, you get a quick rehearsal in and then you go out! And it starts to really come together during the course of the tour. The new songs are all very fun to play and very well received – any song is fun to play if people are familiar with it!"

CONSPIRACY OF HEARTS

If you've been following Slash's career since his 80s heyday, it might be surprising to note that it's nearly a decade since he kicked off the solo project that became Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators. In that time, he's released four varied albums (three with The Conspirators), and discovered something that he hadn't truly found since he left Guns in the mid 90s – a home.

"I think when I first set out on this back in 2010, it was really a vehicle for me to be able to play most of the stuff that I'd been involved with – so it was Guns, Velvet, Snakepit… and stuff off my then-new solo record. But then when we got into *Apocalyptic Love* we began to establish a fanbase and it felt like it wasn't just a fluke thing or a one-shot deal, it was actually looking like it was going to continue on. And I think that's important, because people will gravitate towards something if they know you're serious."

The volume of work that he's built up as a solo artist is reflected in the makeup of his current tour setlist, but his 'other job' also played a big part in his desire to focus on his solo material with The Conspirators. "When I went to do the Guns tour, I got a lot of wanting to play those songs out of my system," Slash explains. "Y'know, I'm playing it with the guys I used to play it with. So when it came to touring on this record, we not only have an actual catalogue now, but also I don't need to play those other songs – there's no reason to play *Sweet Child O' Mine* in this band, y'know?"

BACK IN THE SADDLE

There's definitely one band that there *is* a reason to play *Sweet Child O' Mine* in, however, and since 2016, Slash has been taking the stage alongside Axl

Rose and Duff McKagan for the first time since his first stint with the band came to an end in 1994.

The 'Not In This Lifetime…' tour brought to an end one of the most acrimonious splits in the history of rock and pulled in over half a billion dollars in its two-year run, making it the second-highest grossing tour in history. Fans clearly loved it, then, but we're curious as to what it felt like for the man himself to step back out on stage with Guns N' Roses for the first time in over two decades…

"Oh man, it was overwhelming – it was so cool," Slash enthuses. "Because it was a long time – we're talking more than 20 years from the last show in 1994… it was 22 years since the last time we'd played together. And obviously I'd played with Duff [since then] but there's a certain dynamic in the three of us together. It was awesome, and it's a really great experience."

After so long doing his own thing, we couldn't help but wonder if Slash found the reality of being back in Guns different to being in The Conspirators, but in truth, Slash remains Slash no matter what band he's in… "Actually, I don't do very much different in either band," he confirms. "Axl of course is the focus point of Guns, and I just sort of run around doing my thing! And in that respect, it's very similar with The Conspirators, in that I leave it up to Myles to be the front guy. I don't talk to the audience or anything, Again, I just run around doing my own thing! But I've been doing that for almost 10 years now, so I've gotten used to that, but with Guns I just fell into my normal place in that configuration!"

HOME TURF

Touring Europe also offers Slash the opportunity to spend some time in the UK, where he spent the early years of his life. Revisiting his old stomping ground gives him a chance to reflect on the considerable impact those formative years in England had on the musician he'd become. "I didn't know it at the time, but that was where it all started for me," he reflects. "My dad and his brothers were huge rock 'n' roll junkies – the kind of kids that pulled a record out and felt the texture of the sleeve, put it on the turntable and analysed every song – serious stuff! I was raised in that… and it was like The Kinks, Gene Vincent, the Stones, some Beatles, The Who was the big one, and The Yardbirds and The Moody Blues.

"That was a very big part of my earliest memories, and then going in to London on the train and hanging out in the whole 60s beatnik scene that my dad was part of, crashing at their flats, doing all that! So rock 'n' roll guitar for me began in Stoke, and that was just part of my upbringing, so when I picked up a guitar, that was one of the reasons I was never a big 80s-guitar-influenced guy, because what really touched me was Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, Brian Jones, Mick Taylor, Dave Davies… all those different guys."

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ABOVE Slash has been road-testing Gibson's latest Les Pauls with both The Conspirators and GN'R

When it came to finally getting his hands on a guitar, Slash's first experience was with the "one-string wonder" – an old Spanish guitar with a single string that his grandmother gave him. "That was my first discovery of being able to put fingers in different places and come up with something that you actually recognised," he recalls.

The most significant moment, however, was when he got himself an electric guitar with a full complement of strings. "When I got a real guitar, I started working out chords with those top three strings," he recalls. "I think the most memorable moment was when I was able to do a real blues thing – that was all, but it was an overwhelming parting of the sky!"

PAUL BEARER

It's entirely appropriate that the aforementioned epiphany happened on a Les Paul-shaped instrument, as in the decades since that experience, Saul Hudson has become arguably the most iconic Les Paul player of all. Indeed, his affection for Gibson's iconic single-cut was so inherent in Slash, he can't even recall the moment he first encountered one, it's just always been the guitar for him.

"I don't remember when I actually first laid eyes on a Les Paul," he admits. "I just remember almost subconsciously thinking, 'That's a cool-looking guitar'. Because when I started, I didn't know anything! With all that musical upbringing, and all those gigs I went to with my parents, I didn't really know anything about how a guitar worked!

"And so when I actually started playing guitar I'd have to go, 'Okay, well I like this song, or this solo, and there's a picture of the guy in the band, and he's playing that guitar…' and I remember seeing the Les Paul often enough to notice it was cool. I don't think I was ever attracted to the Strat… and the Flying V was a little bit too flashy for me."

Once he'd got one in his hands, however, that affection deepened and Slash discovered that the guitar was everything he needed it to be.

"I just feel comfortable with it," he shrugs. "I like the deepness of the tone of a Les Paul. The humbuckers have a lot to do with that. But then there's also the heaviness of it – I think that lends itself to the richness of the sound. But then I've never really known that for sure, because some very heavy Les Pauls sound very, very thin. It's just a warm guitar, and it's great for single-note stuff, which I do a lot of. If you get a good Les Paul and the right Marshall and just dial it in right, for me, that's just always been the ultimate rock 'n' roll sound."

The ultimate rock 'n' roll sound it may be, but when it comes to writing, Slash prefers to stick to one half of the equation – for reasons that are scarcely believable from one of the most admired guitarists of all time.

"My go-to guitar writing is just a non-amplified Les Paul, because I don't like anyone to hear what I'm working on – I'm very self-conscious that way!" he explains. "The electric guitar played acoustic is great if you don't want people to pay attention to what you're working on. I haven't really grown out of that.

I'm still a very self-conscious and insecure guitar player!"

Slash's marriage to the Les Paul might be a lifetime commitment, but that doesn't mean that he's not prepared to try new things in an attempt to freshen things up in their relationship. As the recording of *Living The Dream* proved, with a very un-Slash pickup choice entering the mix…

"I was a little bit more relaxed and a bit more willing to not rush through it," he explains. "On previous Conspirators records – it's been very much, 'Just pick this guitar up and do it!' But *Living The Dream* I did at my own studio, and I pulled some old guitars out and started using those. It's funny, for a lot of the record I ended up using a '56 Goldtop, which had soapbars in it – I used that for a lot of the record.

"Normally, I wouldn't be a P-90 guy, but I think I've just been falling into this thing where I like more of a guitar-y guitar sound – where you're using less gain to give a cleaner, but still aggressive, rock-guitar sound. I found that the Derrig guitar that I've been using a lot in my career is kind of a cross between a rock guitar and heavy metal, which is fine, but I think on this last record, I was going for something that was a little bit more old-school and cleaner in the guitar sound."

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"I'VE BEEN FALLING INTO THIS THING WHERE I LIKE MORE OF A GUITAR-Y GUITAR SOUND – USING LESS GAIN TO GIVE A CLEANER, BUT STILL AGGRESSIVE, ROCK-GUITAR SOUND"

ABOVE With Guns at the Roy Wilkins Arena in St Paul, Minnesota in 1988

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

For a man who loves his Les Paul so much, becoming a Gibson ambassador must surely have been a dream come true for Slash, but in reality, things were not well with the Nashville company, with the business in the midst of a challenging period that culminated in a bankruptcy filing in 2018.

News of the company's financial woes took many guitar players by surprise, but as someone who was very close to what was going on in Nashville, Slash had sensed something wasn't right for some time.

"I think I was always aware of certain changes," he reflects. "Not so much in Gibson proper – it was just that there were all these new divisions being added. Amendments to the company that were unnecessary, stuff that I didn't really see the vision for. But I was like, 'Eh, whatever!' because it wasn't affecting what I do.

"But when I started to do more signature models with Gibson, I started to become more aware of the experimental stuff they were doing with the electronic stuff, which was becoming a big part of the fabric of the brand. And I was like, 'I just don't get it! I don't need it, so I don't know why anybody else is going to need it!'

"Then there was a lot of turnover happening in the last couple of years with some of the really key people who'd been at Gibson forever, and that's when it started to get a little weird. And then the inevitable happened."

The "inevitable" was Gibson filing for bankruptcy in May 2018, which led to the installation of a new CEO in former Levi's man JC Curleigh, as well as a brand-new management team whose job it was to get the company back on its feet and return it to its core message as an iconic guitar company.

As befits its most famous endorsee, Slash was aware that big changes were afoot at Gibson. "I've been very close to the company for the last 10 years, but very close to the people who work there – not necessarily Henry [Juszkiewicz] while he was running it, but everybody else. So when all of this started coming down, I was very aware that it was happening and as soon as it was done, I met with the new CEO and we sat down for a couple of hours to talk about what's going on," he explains. "It's funny, I've started noticing in their marketing that something has changed – I could see that something was different."

Curleigh's track record transforming Levi's speaks for itself, but the figure in the new regime that Slash is picks out for special mention is new chief merchant officer, Cesar Gueikian. "The guy that's running Gibson now, I really, really like," he enthuses. "He's got great ideas, and he's a guitar nerd, but he's also a very smart businessman. He has a good vision for the company that's more in line with what myself and other Gibson loyalists will appreciate."

Worldimage.net

ROAD TESTED

The 'new' Gibson made its debut at NAMM 2019 with an overhauled range of guitars that seemed to put the focus squarely back on giving Gibson lovers modern takes on the company's most iconic instruments. The press and fans were certainly impressed, but has Slash been equally smitten?

"The new guitars are amazing!" he affirms. "They did the first run of all their key models, and they let me play one of each, and I was like: 'There's such a huge difference here… but there's nothing different!' There's something about the mindset going into making them that's different. Because it's the same guitar! But there's definitely a noticeable change there."

Slash reveals that he took the overhauled Les Paul models out on tour with both Guns N' Roses and on his solo tour, and came away suitably impressed with how the guitars performed on the road.

"They feel tight and solid, is the main feel thing," he explains. "For me, I use heavy strings, and it gives a certain amount of tension, and that is all there. But they just feel really good and they sound really good. You know how you pick up a guitar and you get a smile on your face because it's not buzzing, it's not doing any of those little things that you find unsavoury? You don't think about it, you just feel happy doing it!"

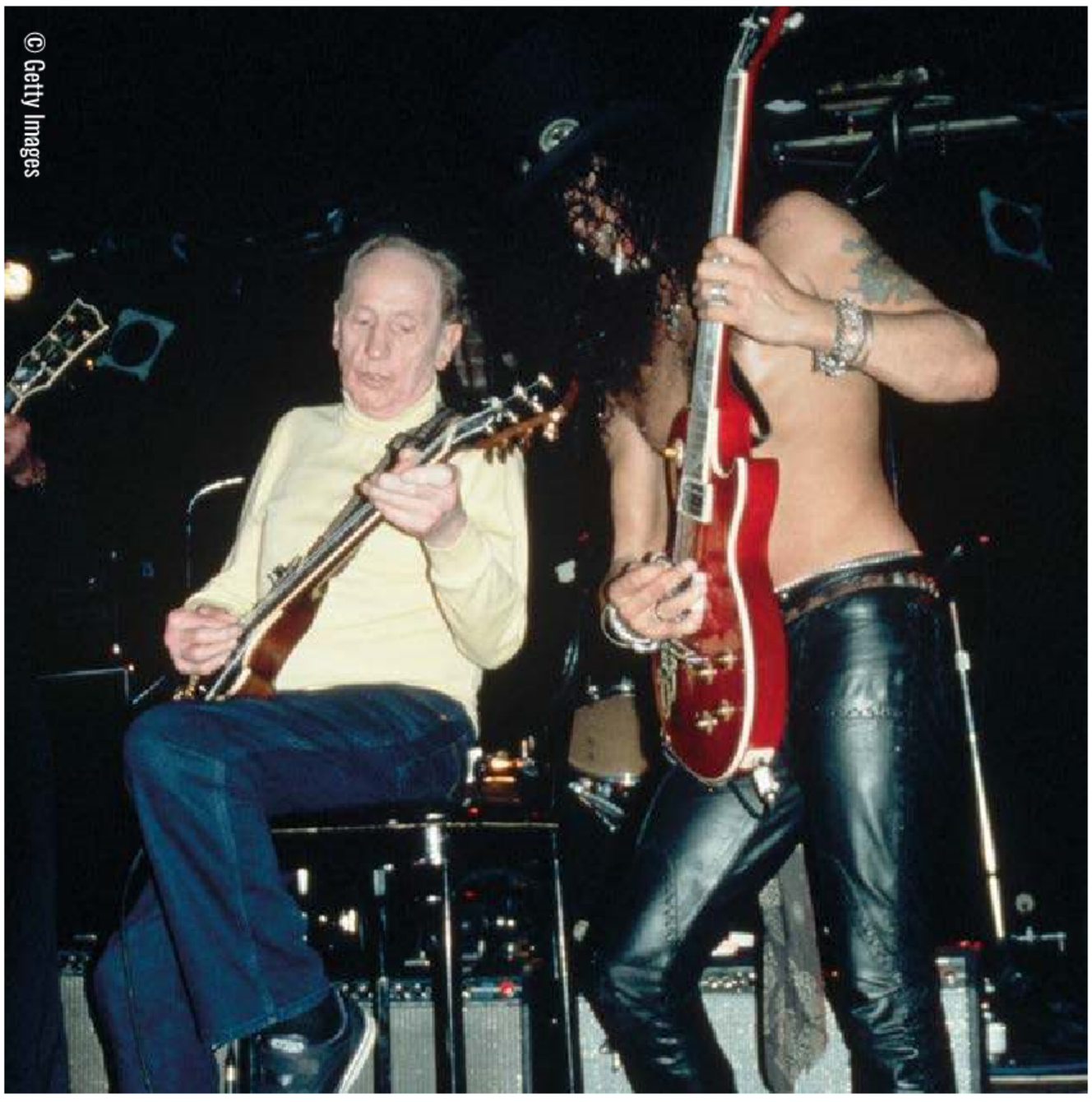
He wasn't taking the new Gibsons on tour for fun, however – as Gibson's most high-profile signature artist, it's understandable that talks are now in the pipeline for a brand-new Slash signature model that will incorporate these new improvements.

"There were developments that were happening right towards the end [of Gibson's previous regime] there that I couldn't adhere to," says Slash. "But now we're back to the traditional Les Paul – it's fundamentally the same guitar, it's pretty much a Standard. But the new one that I'm working on with them… I'm not going to give out too many details, but they're cool, and I'm playing a couple live right now."

KNOW YOUR PLACE

Now that he's back in Guns N' Roses and with nearly a decade with The Conspirators under his belt, it's easy to forget that for a period in the 90s and early 2000s, Slash was an elite gun for hire, who worked with everyone from Carole King and Rihanna to Lenny Kravitz and The Yardbirds – we wonder if he misses the variety that period offered him…

"I've always loved doing that. I haven't been doing it much lately, because I've been busy in two bands, and I've also been doing the movie-production thing," he explains. "We'll see if anything comes up in the near or not too distant future. I loved doing sessions and I love playing with different people and all that stuff. You'd meet someone who you really like and admire, or whose material you appreciated, and then you'd hang out and talk, and then end up working together. That's how it was, especially in the late 90s and early 2000s when I was just wandering around! But I've just been so tied up with stuff of late I just haven't been able to do it."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"I APPRECIATE ROCK 'N' ROLL'S NOT PART OF THE MAINSTREAM. I THINK IT'S GREAT, BECAUSE YOU KNOW WHO THE ROCK FANS ARE NOW, Y'KNOW?"

Listen to the radio at the moment and it's clear that the electric guitar isn't exactly at the forefront of popular music, so as someone who knows a thing or two about bringing rock 'n' roll to different audiences, we conclude our chat by asking Slash if he thinks guitar music is still in a healthy place right now…

"Y'know, the guitar's a funny thing," he ponders. "It's constantly in and out of vogue. I think in what you consider pop music, it's a mainstay, but it's not a featured instrument. But back in the 80s, it was like, you had fuckin' metal or you had no guitars at all! But I am aware of where rock 'n' roll is in the bigger commercial scheme of things and I sort of appreciate that it's not part of the mainstream. I think it's great, because you know who the rock fans are now, y'know?" **G**

***Living The Dream* is out now. See slashonline.com for more info and tour dates**

OPPOSITE Slash is working with Gibson on a new signature Les Paul – and he's used them live lately, too

ABOVE Les Paul and Slash tearing it up. Paul, who died in 2009, aged 94, had a weekly residency at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York into his 90s

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STAR GUITARS

DICKEY BETTS' 1958 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD

This 1958 Les Paul is a beautiful player, with true star provenance thanks to not one but two Allman Brothers Band members having once owned it…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

GUITAR

Previously owned by two bona-fide members of the Southern rock royal family in the shape of former Allman Brothers Band guitarists Dickey Betts and Dan Toler, this instrument was also the first sunburst Les Paul that a young Joe Bonamassa heard live on stage. "I was six years old and never forgot that evening," said Bonamassa, describing the 1983 encounter in New York State as "life changing".

The modern-day blues star was reunited with the pivotal Les Paul in May 2019 when its current owner, vintage-guitar dealer and collector Matthieu Lucas, took it along to a Bonamassa concert in Clermont-Ferrand in France. Joe used it onstage that evening.

The eagle-eyed among you will spot that, besides having a dark back, the guitar's plain maple top isn't centre-joined. This is an indication the '58 started out life as a Goldtop, with the sunburst refinish apparently applied at Betts' behest in the Gibson factory in the mid 1970s. Along with a headstock repair, a refret and a set of Grovers, this LP may not have had the easiest life, but it's still cool as hell and is a fabulous playing and sounding instrument.

To see more of Matt's guitars, visit mattsguitar.shop

LEFT A headstock repair and a set of Grover tuners are indicators of this historic guitar's working life in the hands of hard-touring Southern rock royalty

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VINTAGE BENCH TEST
CUSTOM FIT

The black-lacquered, jazz-club sophistication of the earliest LP Custom takes more of its styling cues from Steinway than Stromberg. We step out with a grand '56 model…

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Introduced in late 1953, the first Les Paul Custom differs from the standard Goldtop model in three ways – an all-mahogany body, a fully intonatable bridge and a 'staple' single-coil pickup in the neck position. The latter seems to have been an attempt to keep the man whose name was on the headstock on-brand – early photos of Les Paul using his signature model reveal that he'd installed a DeArmond Dynasonic in the neck position of his Goldtop, and Gibson was not pleased.

Les Paul was such a superstar, the fact that he felt the need to mod his new signature solidbody with an aftermarket pickup was obviously an embarrassment for the company, so something needed to be done.

It may have rectangular rather than round polepieces, but the staple single-coil was essentially Gibson's version of the Dynasonic, with individual screws for adjusting polepiece height. The diagonal fixing screws are a throwback to the earliest Goldtops and all the magnets are alnico V.

Complete with its original gold-lined black case, this 1956 example shows few signs of age, although the waffle-back tuners are a little vague and some of the shafts have been bent over the years. The neck carve doesn't quite have the palm-fitting comfort of some of the finest 50s Gibsons we've played, but it's still a very nice rounded profile, with very little shoulder and less depth than you might expect.

There are a few lacquer chips on the back of the neck and headstock edges, but the body is remarkably unscathed. Lacquer-checking is minimal and besides some slightly opaque cloudiness on the front, the finish looks remarkable. The ebony fingerboard and pearl inlays are in perfect condition and there's still some height left on the skinny, flat-topped frets.

The only telltale signs that this guitar has seen a lot of action are the way the neck binding has been worn into a rollover that runs evenly along both sides, and some plectrum damage to the bass side binding adjacent to the neck pickup. The control cavity contains oil-filled bumblebee capacitors and nothing has been touched since it left Kalamazoo.

ABOVE The Custom was created by Gibson in response to Les Paul's desire for a more luxurious-looking guitar

IN USE

The all-mahogany body doesn't have as much effect on the acoustic resonance as you might expect. It's possibly a bit richer in harmonics than most Les Paul Standards, but nowhere near as loud or lively when unplugged as a '54 Goldtop equipped with a wrapover tailpiece. On balance, our experience seems to indicate that the ABR-1 bridge arrangement has more influence on the tone than 'tonewood' does.

Although identical in dimensions and similar in looks, the pickups on this guitar are sonically quite different. The commonly used term 'staple P-90' is perhaps a misnomer, because this is very much its own thing. Comparing the staple with a neck P-90 in a '54 Goldtop demonstrates that the former is a very powerful pickup.

Despite being set significantly lower than the P-90, the staple matches its output and then some. But for a high-output pickup, there's no shortage of

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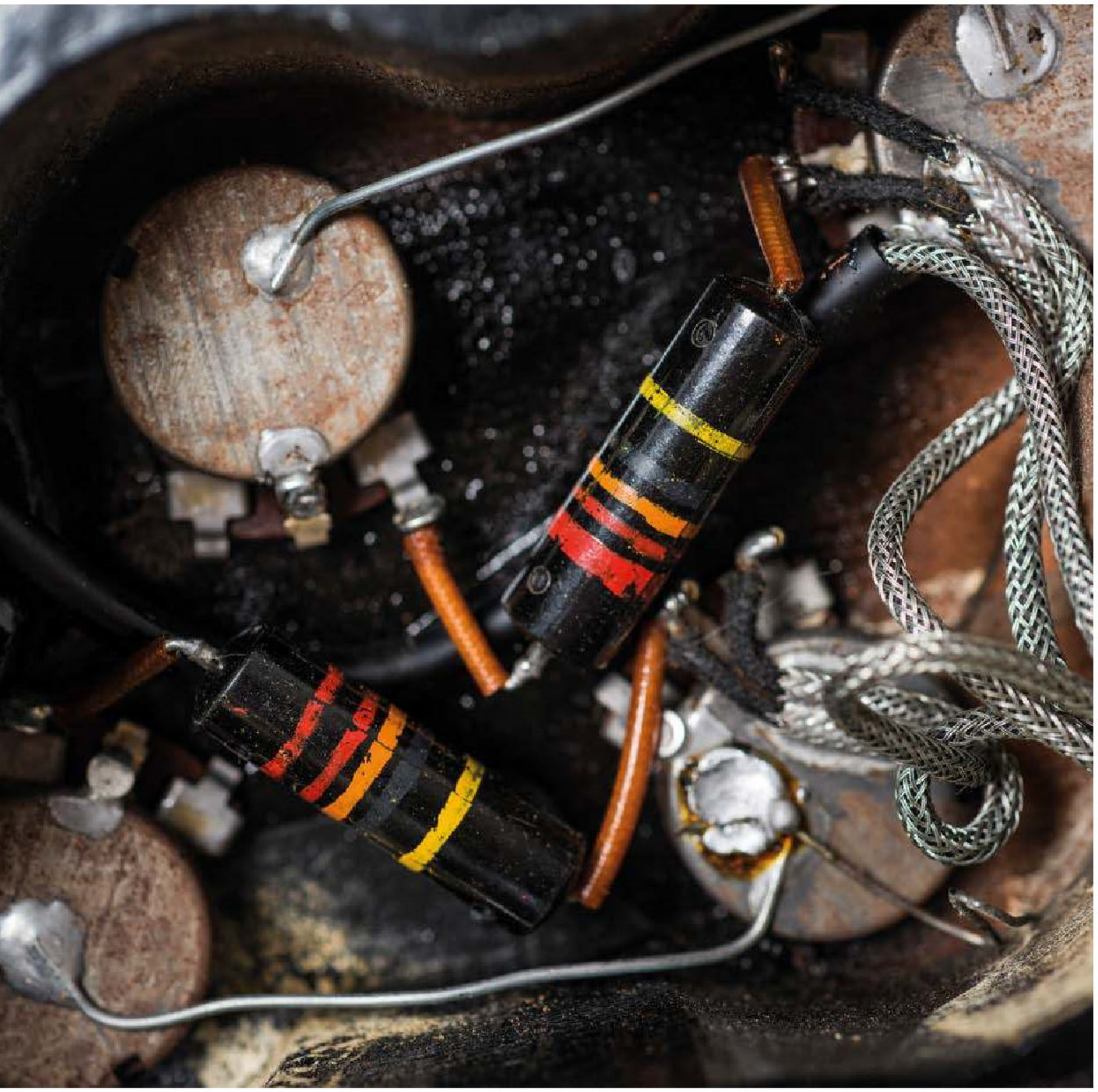

YOU GET THAT GREAT MID-50S P-90 TONE. HI-FI IT'S NOT: BUT IF SNARLY AND GROWLY NASAL CHIME DOES IT FOR YOU, THIS LES PAUL CUSTOM DOESN'T DISAPPOINT

clarity and in fact, this one sounds airy and bright. It goes deeper in the bass frequencies, too, but it never loses focus or definition. Jazz chord inversions are presented with piano-like clarity and tremendous detail. Such is the frequency range, the controls have more to work with than usual, and the variety of tones on tap may surprise you.

As much as a guitar pickup could perform more like a microphone during the mid 1950s, this is probably as good as it gets – along with the DeArmond Dynasonic. And as we have already discussed, aping that design is really what the staple pickup design was all about.

As an audio engineer, Les Paul valued high fidelity and sonic purity above everything else, and they're certainly a big part of the staple's appeal. But it also has bags of character, with ample bass thump and a prettiness in the treble that keeps things musical and interesting. Les would later go even further in the hi-fi direction with his low-impedance pickups, but to modern ears, they sound a bit bland and sterile compared to these.

Maybe Gibson only fitted one staple unit because they were costly to manufacture, and they figured the jazz guys weren't that interested in bridge pickups anyway. It's a mismatch made in heaven for us, however, because the versatility and sonic spread of this LPC are far greater as a result. Switch to the bridge and of course you also get that great mid-50s P-90 tone.

Hi-fi it's not: but if snarly and growly nasal chime does it for you, this LPC doesn't disappoint. The two pickups need some adjustment to balance out, with the P-90 set way closer to the strings, but once they're set you can switch back and forth seamlessly. Better still, these two pickups meet in the middle to create a third, very distinct, tone.

The Staple adds high- and low-frequency content to the P-90's wiry mid-focused roar – along with a greater sense of articulation and detail. There's also a pronounced midrange scoop that notching back the neck volume rapidly accentuates. Get the balance right and you can veer towards a pseudo 'out of phase' tone that combines T-Bone Walker

OPPOSITE TOP The internal wiring hasn't been touched since the guitar left Kalamazoo, and the bumblebee capacitors are all original

OPPOSITE LEFT The ebony fingerboard and pearl inlays are perfectly preserved and the slim, flat-topped frets still have some height left

ABOVE The ABR-1 bridge and stop tailpiece have lost a fair bit of their gold plating due to years of playing

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The pinstriped body binding has yellowed in places, but is otherwise in good nick for a guitar of this age

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Gibson
Les Paul
CUSTOM

honk with a hint of Ricky jangle. Leaving the neck volume on 10 and rolling back the bridge is like applying a notch filter, with the scoop occurring lower in the frequency range. So the tone still has a phasey quality, but it's fuller, smoother and sweeter. Even by the high standards of 50s Les Pauls (no pun intended), this is an unusually versatile and sophisticated instrument.

CLASS IS PERMANENT

Unlike the hooligan Goldtop, the Les Paul Custom reveals its charms gradually. This was designed to be a classier, more upmarket instrument and by and large, it is. The Custom reputedly came about because Les requested a guitar that was like a tuxedo. While many of us might enjoy wearing a tux from time to time, the novelty value would be lost if we had to wear one every day… much like a jobbing jazz musician.

On the whole, that analogy fits in well with how we feel about this guitar. It oozes quality and feels wonderful, but as an everyday player, our desert island choice would still be a P-90 Goldtop of a similar vintage – if we could afford one, of course. Having said that, we think this Custom might be a secret weapon in the studio, because its clarity and well-mannered dynamics would make it so easy to record, and you could dial up myriad tones that are familiar and yet just that little bit different. The tuners could do with a refurb and some might suggest a refret is in order, but we think it's fine as it is.

Overall condition is excellent and, as far as we can tell, the only non-factory items are the strings. The Staple Custom is an interesting and unfairly overlooked model in the Lester lineage and we wonder how many examples out there are as good as this one… **G**

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £24,995
DESCRIPTION Solidbody guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Mahogany body with set mahogany neck, ebony fretboard with pearl markers, 22 frets
HARDWARE Kluson waffle-back tuners, Tune-o-matic bridge with stop tailpiece
ELECTRICS Staple single-coil (neck), P-90 (bridge), individual pickup volume and tone controls, 3-way switch
FINISH Black nitrocellulose
SCALE LENGTH 625mm/24.63"
NECK WIDTH 42.7mm at nut, 53.05mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.75mm at nut, 51.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.35kg/9.57lbs
CONTACT ATB Guitars
atbguitars.com

OPPOSITE The Kluson tuners are one of the few aspects of the guitar that are showing signs of age, and some of the shafts have been bent over the years

ABOVE The 'staple' pickup was created after Les Paul modded his Goldtop with a DeArmond Dynasonic pickup

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GIBSON

2019 LES PAUL STANDARD '50S & LES PAUL TRIBUTE

From the Original and Modern Collections comes a pair of new production Les Pauls that might just prove less is more…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

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It all seemed like it was going rather well for Gibson. Rejuvenated under new ownership and with fresh investment, the goodwill generated by the company's NAMM Show return in January was palpable. Led by former Levi's main man JC Curleigh, Gibson seemed ready to move forward, focus on making great guitars again and exorcise the ghosts of the latter part of Henry Juszkiewicz's troubled reign.

Then came June, *that* Mark Agnesi video, and a laundry list of news stories about trademark infringement, litigation, counter-claims, statements about "shifting from confrontation to collaboration," and a lot more besides. And as we type this, a week or so prior to Summer NAMM, it looks like it'll be some time before the dust settles. However, away from the lurid social-media posts and the sound of hundreds of lawyers rubbing their hands together with glee, there's the small matter of some electric guitars to write about. After all, that's what got us here in the first place.

In July, we featured Gibson Custom's flagship 2019 model, the 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard. Now it's time to check out what the production-line Original and Modern Collections have to offer.

FACTORY RECORDS

Back in April, we flew out to see Gibson in Nashville and witnessed first-hand the improvements that have already taken place under the watchful eye of new chief merchant officer Cesar Gueikian. Simple things – better lighting and extraction, more efficient workflows – have already had a positive effect on the factory floor and when we visited, there was a buzz of positivity and excitement about the company's new lines.

For 2019, Gibson's electric-guitar output is split into the Original Collection, the Modern Collection and Gibson Custom. The Original and Modern Collection instruments are made at the company's 'Gibson USA' plant on Massman Drive in the eastern part of the city, near the airport; the Custom division is situated just over a mile away on Elm Hill Pike.

During our visit, Cesar walked us through the Original Collection. "This is where we look back and pay tribute to our iconic past and bring those classic models back," he explained. "It's our way of celebrating our past, our legacy and our heritage. None of these guitars are chambered, they are all solid, just like we did them back in the 50s." As we're shown around, we notice a few nods to the nerds,

such as skinnier fingerboard binding on the Les Paul Standard '50s and '60s.

"We went for thinner binding generally in everything we're doing in the Original Collection, including the SGs," reveals the CMO. "It's closer to what the classic models were, it's more authentic, it's what we did back then. There was no science to what we were doing in the 50s, you see variations on original models – the thin binding is definitely more consistent in terms of what we did in the late 50s and so we've gone there."

The specification changes aren't just aesthetic, though: "Everything we're doing in the Original Collection is hand-wired with Orange Drop capacitors. We particularly focused on the audio taper, to not bring output down when it cleans up the sound." With weight relief off the table for the Original Collection instruments, we wonder if sourcing lightweight mahogany for the range has been a challenge. Cesar says no: "We have a long term, steady source of mahogany. A couple of years ago, we did a deal with the government of Fiji, so we're in a really good position today, as we have several years of what I would consider to be lightweight mahogany."

ON THE RANGE

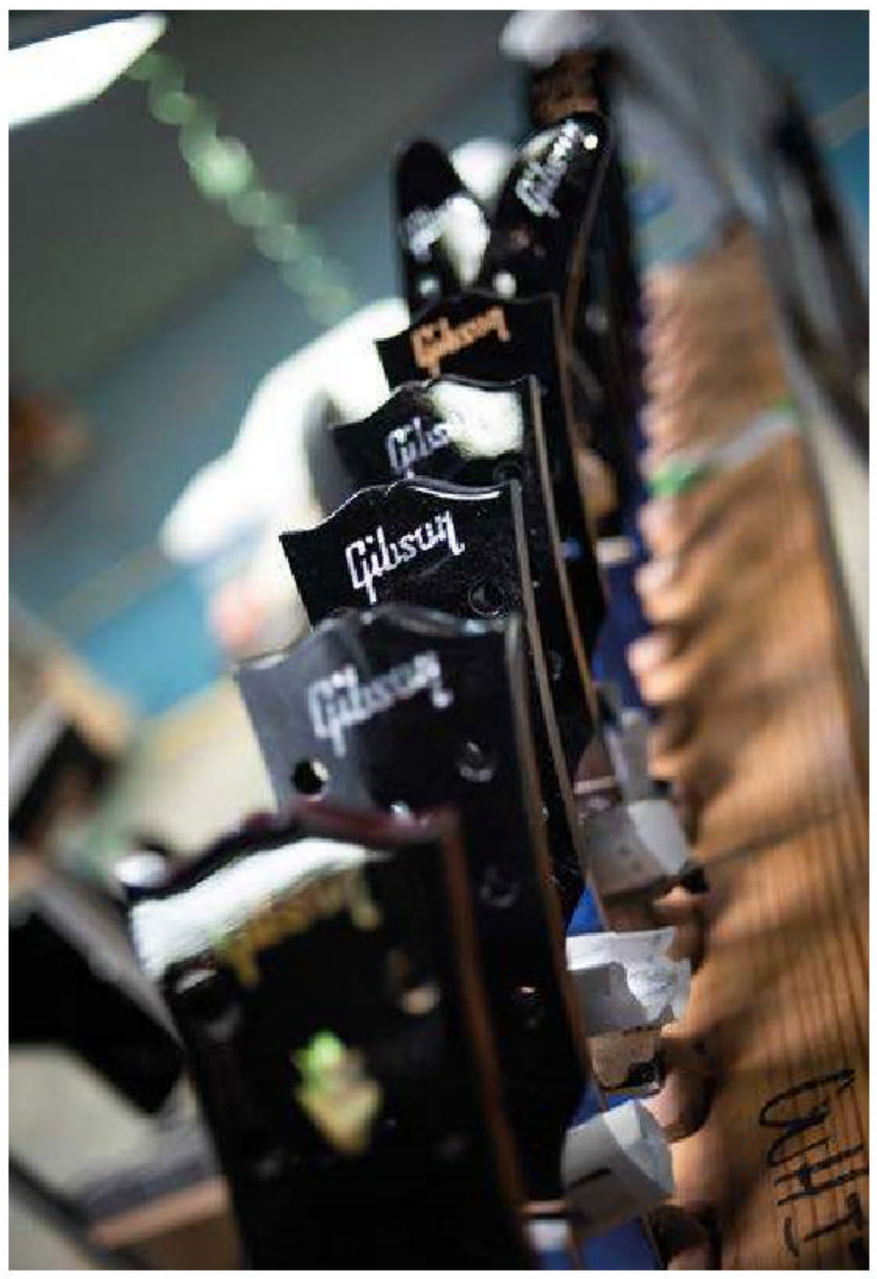
If the Original Collection is about delivering instruments that don't force innovation down people's throats, the Modern Collection gives Gibson licence to experiment. However, alongside more tricked-out models such as the Les Paul Modern, you'll also find the most accessibly priced LPs in the new catalogue.

Upgraded from the recent Les Paul Studio Tribute, the new Les Paul Tribute model features crowns rather than dots and covered rather than uncovered humbuckers, while you also get the chunkier strap buttons that Gibson has used extensively of late. The mahogany body is also weight relieved.

The exposed edges of the plain maple top create a faux-bound effect that complements the golden-brown tone of the maple neck, while the Satin Tobacco Burst is joined in the range by three other satin options that ape the various stages of Burst fade: Iced Tea, Honeyburst and Cherry Sunburst.

The Standard – which has much in common with the previous Traditional model – has a hard brown case rather than a deluxe gigbag, with a handle that's considerably more comfortable than they were in the 1950s, with more reliable clasps and plush red lining.

When it comes to the guitar inside, you get gloss lacquer, real binding and a striking figured top instead



THIS SPREAD Les Pauls in various stages of undress on the Gibson factory floor in Nashville

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ABOVE The Les Paul Tribute in Satin Tobacco Burst is weight relieved and features a maple neck

OPPOSITE TOP The Tribute's controls are PCB-mounted to reduce assembly costs

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Vintage-style machineheads with keystone buttons adorn the headstocks of both models

of the Tribute's plain grain. Strap buttons revert to daintier, vintage-style units, but it's a straightforward mod if you prefer something more secure. With no weight relief and a one-piece mahogany back, it's a heavier guitar, but not excessively so, and at a shade under 9lb, it's lighter than many 50s instruments and balances well, whether seated or standing.

The rosewood 'board is a darker and more attractive slab than the Tribute's lighter, purple-streaked 'board. The neck is a short-tenon quartersawn mahogany affair, while the revised fingerboard binding – still with a slightly tangerine hue, but slimmed down dramatically for more of a 1950s appearance – means that the nibs are smaller and less intrusive for players with a wide vibrato.

The Standard's figured top impresses at this price point, with the centre-joined flame maple shimmering under lights and much like an old LP, it can look almost plain from some angles and erupt from others.

In order to show off as much of that flame as possible, our review model comes without its pickguard fitted, but it ships with one in the case should you prefer the 'guard on' look. If drilling holes in a pristine new instrument is intimidating, then we'd recommend asking if the scratchplate can be fitted at the point of sale. It's somewhat easier to fit the Tribute model's absent 'poker chip' pickup-selector surround, which also ships in the case.

IN USE

Although both of our review guitars have shipped without their screw-coil polepiece heights being optimised and have slightly sharp edges at the nut, the basics are otherwise all present and correct. The frets have been installed neatly and the ends are nicely rounded on the Tribute's unbound fingerboard, while the thin satin lacquer on the back of the neck provides a very smooth ride.

Every Gibson USA model's frets are levelled and dressed by a Plek machine and even when we test the Plek machine's capabilities with some extreme bends in high registers, there's no choking or fretting out to be found.

The Tribute's rounded C profile is slim but hugely playable and doesn't paint you into any stylistic corners. The maple neck and 'ultra modern' weight relief translate into an airy and enthusiastic performance that's really appealing and although it lacks some of the midrange power of a solid-bodied,

KEY FEATURES

LES PAUL TRIBUTE
PRICE £999 (inc. gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Single cutaway electric guitar. Made in USA
BUILD Mahogany back with 'ultra modern' weight relief, maple top, set maple neck with 12"/304.8mm radius rosewood fingerboard with acrylic trapezoid inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets, Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Aluminium Nashville Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stop tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS 490R (neck) and 490T (bridge) humbuckers, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/628.6mm
NECK WIDTH 42.8mm at nut, 52.4mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.7mm at first fret, 25.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.6mm at nut, 50.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.49kg/7.7lb
FINISH Satin Tobacco Burst nitrocellulose (as reviewed), Satin Iced Tea, Satin Honeyburst, Satin Cherry Sunburst
CONTACT Gibson gibson.com

9/10 **A real-world gigging guitar that's stripped down but wears its heritage on its sleeve**

mahogany neck Lester, there's plenty of sustain. Many will prefer its breezier sound, especially in an era where cleaner and more textural tones predominate.

The 490R and 490T aren't the pickups most loved by Les Paul aficionados, but the alnico II units

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ABOVE The Les Paul Standard '50s features a breathtaking figured maple top

OPPOSITE TOP The view inside the control cavity of the Les Paul Standard '50s reveals hand-wiring and Orange Drop capacitors

OPPOSITE BOTTOM The vintage-style machineheads operate smoothly and inspire confidence

certainly sound good in this context. It's simply a well put-together, fuss-free instrument that does exactly what it's supposed to and can cover a lot of ground.

Moving on to the Standard, the out of the box setup is again very good indeed. It's dreamily playable, and unlike many original Bursts and slavish reissues, you don't have to flip the G saddle around to get it to intonate correctly. We love the neck – Gibson has resisted the temptation to go for a huge mid-50s profile and instead, this beautifully rounded carve has a medium-depth more akin to a '59.

Comparing the two neck carves is interesting, because it illustrates that dimensions only tell part of the story. Even though the Tribute fattens out a little more at the 12th fret, it feels sleeker overall, while the '50s model feels fuller because of its more even, gradual taper as you head up to the octave marker.

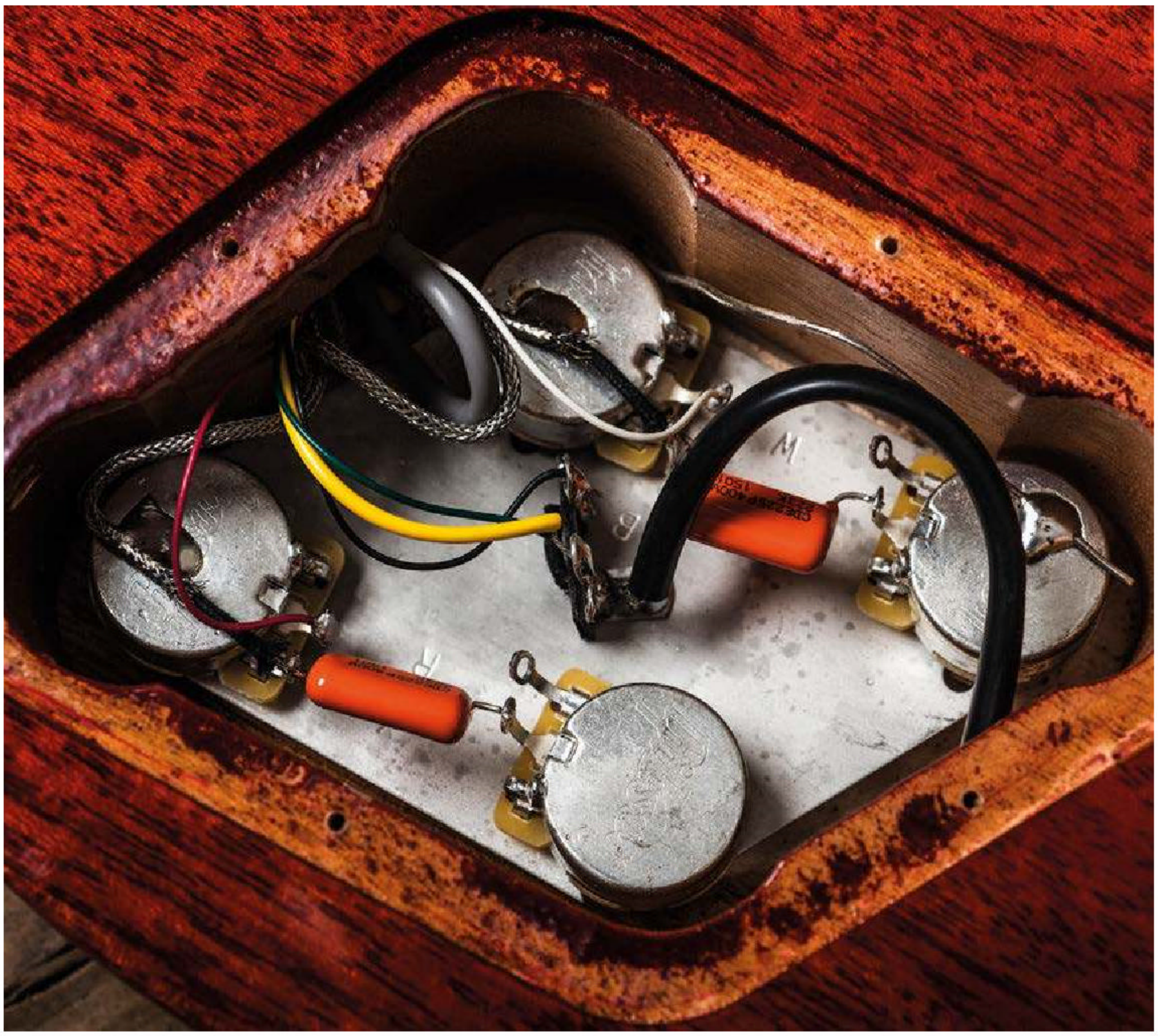
Does double the price mean double the tone? The reality is it never does, but the Standard's Burstbucker tones do feel a little more complex in the midrange, with more sophistication and depth overall. While it isn't as vintage-authentic as an R9 loaded with unpotted pickups wired 50s-style, there's still more subtlety here than some of the production-line Standards of the last couple of decades.

KEY FEATURES

LES PAUL STANDARD '50S
PRICE £1,999 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody single-cutaway electric guitar. Made in USA
BUILD Solid mahogany back with figured maple top, set mahogany neck with 12"/304.8mm radius rosewood fingerboard with acrylic trapezoid inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets, Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Nickel ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stop tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS Burstbucker 1 (neck), Burstbucker 2 (bridge), 2x volume, 2x tone, Orange Drop tone capacitors, 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/628.6mm
NECK WIDTH 43.3mm at nut, 52.4mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.9mm at first fret, 24.6mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.3mm at nut, 52.4mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.07kg/8.98lb
FINISH Heritage Cherry Sunburst gloss nitrocellulose (as reviewed), Tobacco Burst, Gold Top

8/10 **With its return to classic specs, this straight-ahead Standard will win friends**

Neither instrument has too thick or syrupy a neck pickup and there's much more versatility across the board as a result – especially in the often-overlooked middle setting, where experimenting with your controls delivers a wide range of sounds. We've said



it before, but try knocking back the neck volume to about 8.5 with the pickup selector in the middle position – it's such an expressive voice for lead work and you don't have to pile on the gain to get plenty of sustain and harmonic content to work with.

Although traditionalists might bristle at the Tribute model's cost-saving specifications, such as weight relief, a 5mm shallower body and PCB-mounted controls, we strongly recommend playing one and making up your own mind – this is a toneful, lightweight Les Paul that's less stressful to throw on for a rehearsal or pub gig than its more luxurious sibling.

Both guitars have bridge pickups that are a touch brash when you really dig in and there's definitely room for further improvement. However, on balance, there's an appealing simplicity here which, if not quite a full-scale revolution, feels like a step in the right direction for Gibson – especially when you consider that the pricing is now more competitive, too. ***G***

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THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC

In 1953, Les Paul asked for a guitar that "looked like a tuxedo", but by the late 60s, the Custom had built its own legend. We check out a strummer from '69…

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

The luxurious Les Paul Custom evolved throughout the second half of the 1950s and continued to do so following its reintroduction in 1968. Until 1963, all single- and double-cutaway Custom bodies were made purely from mahogany. When the Les Paul Standard acquired two PAF humbuckers in 1957, the Custom got three. Its fingerboard was always ebony, to match the black lacquer finish.

For its '68 comeback, the Les Paul Custom reverted to two humbuckers – and by this point, Patent Number units were de rigeur in Kalamazoo – and the headstock angle was altered from 17 to 14 degrees. The model's body also finally acquired a maple cap and Gibson attempted to streamline the production process.

During the 1950s, Gibson routed the wiring channels into the mahogany back, then glued a mahogany cap on top before routing the control cavity. The top arch was a complicating factor – the base of the control rout had to be angled so that the cap depth was sufficiently thin enough for the control pot shafts to pass through the holes.

In 1968, Gibson began routing the wire channels and the control cavity into the mahogany back before gluing the cap on. According to guitarhq.com, this changed in February 1969, when Gibson reverted to 1950s practice and the control cavity has a maple 'step' near the bottom where the depth was altered after gluing the cap.

Shortly afterwards, Gibson introduced the 'pancake' body with a two-layer mahogany back sandwiching a thin layer of maple. By mid '69, headstocks acquired 'made in USA' markings and a volute.

Assuming all this information is accurate, it helps to pin the manufacturing date of this Les Paul

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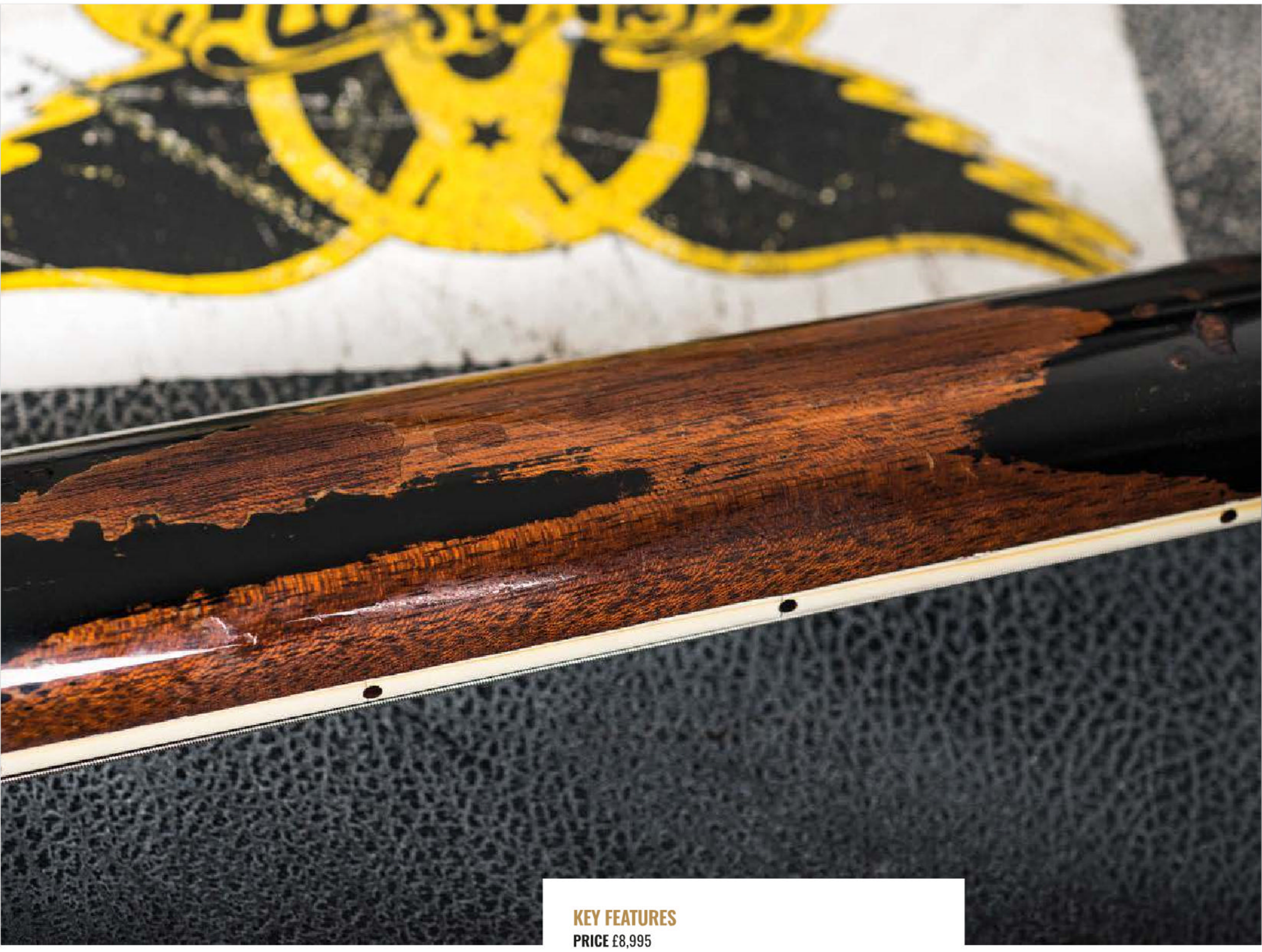

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £8,995
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Mahogany body with maple cap, set mahogany neck with short tenon joint, bound ebony fingerboard, block markers and 22 frets
HARDWARE Vintage Kluson tuners, ABR-1 bridge with retaining wire, stop tailpiece
ELECTRICS 2x Patent Number humbuckers
FINISH Black nitrocellulose
SCALE LENGTH 624mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 43.4mm at nut, 52.04mm at 12th fret
DEPTH OF NECK 21mm at first fret, 25.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 5.09mm at nut, 51.93mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.68kg/10.31lbs
CONTACT ATB Guitars
atbguitars.com

OPPOSITE The pearl inlays on the headstock have become more golden with time and the Gibson logo is a missing-dot example

ABOVE Plenty of finish has worn away from the back of the neck, revealing that Gibson sprayed black coats over clear lacquer

LEFT Forearm wear marks add to this guitar's considerable character

Custom down to a fairly specific timeframe. This guitar has the step rout cut into the maple, so it was made after January 1969, but there is no evidence of a 'pancake' layer. Furthermore, there is no volute or 'made in USA' stamp. On that basis, this was probably on Gibson's production line sometime between February and May 1969.

The guitar's black lacquer has shrunk sufficiently to reveal a join line in the maple top that's about 15mm to the side of the bass tailpiece post, but it's probably the only part of this guitar that hasn't changed colour

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Much of the gold plating has rubbed off the hardware or picked up verdigris around the edges – the pickup covers have fared a little better, likely because they were removed at some point

since 1969. Much of the gold plating has rubbed off the hardware or picked up verdigris around the edges, the clear coats over the binding have yellowed considerably and by the same process, the pearl inlays on the peghead have acquired a golden hue.

Look closely and you'll see how the Gibson logo evolved from the 'kissing dot' style of 1952 to the missing dot of 1969 as it migrated northwards away from the tuners. Speaking of which, its machineheads are patinated waffle-back Klusons and paired with its bound headstock, it's a truly classic Gibson look.

The 1950s Les Paul Customs were known as 'fretless wonders' because they were fitted with low frets to attract non-string-bending jazz guitarists who wanted easy chording and a fast action.

Although the Les Paul was reintroduced at the behest of rockers, Gibson possibly believed the reissue Custom might have jazz appeal. This Custom still has its narrow and low factory frets, so any prospective owner will need to make a decision with regard to playability.

Although currently fitted with a replacement tailpiece, the original will be sold with the guitar. In all other respects, the Custom appears entirely original, from its five-ply pickguard to its witch-hat knobs, control pots and Sprague Black Beauty tone capacitors. The Patent Number pickups are correct, too, although the covers have been removed at some point – this possibly explains why the gold plating on them has largely survived so well. The control cavity solder joints appear untouched.

This old road warrior has patina in spades, yet it feels clean, solid and pleasing to play. A fair amount of finish has worn off the back of the neck, but it's smooth to the touch and it's interesting to observe how Gibson blew the black coats over clear lacquer. You could no doubt lift out some of the stains and ingrained dirt from the finish, but in doing so much of the Custom's appeal and value could be lost.

ABOVE TOP The Custom's aged classic waffle-back Kluson tuners

ABOVE Some of the gold silkscreening still remains

IN USE

The outline may be much the same, but by 1969 the feel and tone of a Les Paul was very different to that of the legendary Bursts of the late 1950s. There's something hefty, solid and even brutal about this Custom that has an appeal all of its own.

Weighing in at over 10lbs and with a neck that's on the chunky side of fat, this is undoubtedly a guitar that requires physical commitment from the player – that is, unless you're a jazzer who gets to perform sitting down, of course!

Acoustically, it's fairly resonant; the transients are quite soft and the overall tone has a smooth, fat and compressed quality. There are issues with the third and second (G and B) string saddles because both strings sound rather muted irrespective of whether they're fretted or played open – happily, this is an easy fix and we note that the bridge has the intonation-adjustment screws facing the stop tailpiece. It may seem like the logical way to do it, but when the tailpiece is set close to the body, the sharp break angle can cause the strings to foul against the screw heads, as is the case here.

While we've often marvelled at the unplugged tones of vintage Gibsons, the Custom only comes to life when it's plugged in – but it soon makes up lost ground. This Custom generates a big, powerful and strong sound. The niceties of upper-harmonic bloom and touch-sensitive dynamics aren't what this Les Paul is about – instead, the bridge pickup provides solid powerchords with deep and growling lows and a useful resonant cut in the upper mids that enhances definition.

Single notes on the neck pickup have a percussive front end that's more of a robust thump than a stinging slap, before easing into a flutey and pure sustain. Compared to PAF-style 'buckers, these are darker, however they're mellow without being bland and when you match them with high-gain amp settings, it's a complementary combination for punk, power pop, heavy blues and hard-rock. Turns out that the old-school Aerosmith sticker on the case is entirely appropriate… **G**

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THE MONEY SHOT
1960 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD

This was one of the first Standards in Italy – and has certainly had a colourful life of mods and repairs, though that hasn't damaged its appeal one bit…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

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Gibson

Gibson moved to colourfast 'tomato soup' sunburst finishes in mid 1960, but Bursts from earlier that year are to all intents and purposes '59s, as evidenced here by serial number 0-1500, with its partially faded finish and transitional neck profile. One of three Les Paul Standards sold in Italy in 1960, this guitar was nicknamed 'Giotto' after the 14th-century Florentine Gothic/ proto-Renaissance painter.

Its first paintings with sound were made by a local musician who added a Hagström vibrato and broke its headstock. During the 1980s, second owner Franco Tonini converted it back to a stoptail, covering the Hagström vibrato rout with an inlay featuring his initials. It certainly gives the guitar an unmistakable look and makes this Burst slightly more affordable than many – although at €174,300, we're still firmly in high-end collector and rockstar territory. *G*

Visit mattsguitar.shop for more on this distinctive and glorious-sounding Les Paul Standard

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO VINTAGE LES PAUL TONE

'Les Paul tone' means lots of different things to lots of different people, but there's no doubt that the blend of clarity, sustain and power offered by original Bursts and Goldtops still represents the high-water mark for many electric guitar fans. Here, we attempt to find out precisely what makes golden-era Les Pauls tick and explain how you too can taste the tone fantastic without breaking the bank…

WORDS HUW PRICE

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Once upon a time, we were checking out a 1960 Les Paul Standard and made the bold claim that anyone could enjoy something unnervingly close to vintage Les Paul tone by combining the right pickups, hardware and electronics with a suitable body. Unsurprisingly, we've since been asked to put our money where our mouth is and show you how.

So, over the following pages, armed with an original 1954 Goldtop, a Gibson Custom Collector's Choice #26 Whitford Burst and our work-in-progress Greco LP-style that we're in the process of converting into a Goldtop, we've compiled a step-by-step guide to achieving vintage Les Paul tone without having to sell your house in the process.

One thing before we start. If you are shooting for that authentic 50s Les Paul tone, we think that success is more likely if you consider things as a whole rather than obsess over specific details. The electric guitar is a 'system' and, as with all systems, individual components interact. Identifying the key components and gaining insight into how they work together is essential. Read on for an analysis of what we consider to be the key components, the way they affect tone and what your options are.

HARDWARE

A significant proportion of vintage Les Pauls were retrofitted with Grover or Schaller machineheads at some point – many have since been converted back to Klusons. The balance of the guitar changes with heavier tuners and you may notice changes in transient attack, but it's hardly a make-or-break issue. The same can be said for nylon nuts: if you do notice differences compared to bone or other materials, you'll only hear them when you play open strings.

Consequently, attention focuses on bridges and tailpieces and we conduct our primary listening tests with the guitars unplugged. We've always found vintage Gibsons a bit softer in the treble and woodier in the mids than even the best reissues. With the electrics eliminated, these differences can only be attributed to the wood, the bridges and tailpieces – or a combination of both.

We test the hypothesis by swapping the original wrapover tailpiece and studs from the 1954 Goldtop onto our Greco and putting the Greco's Faber aluminium tailpiece onto the Gibson. The strings on both guitars are identical sets of Ernie Ball Pure Nickel 0.010s. The results are clear, with the Greco now sounding like a vintage Gibson and the Gibson

taking on the snap, brightness and chime of the Greco. Many would regard the sonic characteristics of the Faber tailpiece as superior, but it's less 'vintage' and vocal sounding and doesn't sustain quite so well.

Moving over to the Collector's Choice LP, we swap the bridge for an ABR-1 taken from a 1961 ES-330. The changes are less dramatic, but still clearly audible. We hear a softening of the treble, which leads to a more vocal midrange and a compressed warmth. The model's owner declares that the vintage ABR-1 has "taken the newness off the guitar", and promptly begins scouring the net for vintage bridges.

Since both wrapover bridges are aluminium, we must conclude that the grade of aluminium being used by Faber differs from the aluminium Gibson was using during the 1950s. Research suggests vintage ABR-1 bridges were cast from an alloy called zamak – containing zinc, aluminium, magnesium, and copper – and there are eight grades of zamak. Collector's Choice bridges are described as 'zinc', but again we suspect the composition may be slightly different.

Vintage PAFs and P-90s (and accurate replicas) tend to be very microphonic, so many of the guitar's unplugged tonal characteristics make it to the amp and they have treble to spare. Therefore, hardware is an important factor in the Les Paul tone equation and your options are to buy vintage parts or find replacements that sound like vintage ones. This area could benefit from more research.

POTENTIOMETERS

Saying that vintage Les Paul controls 'just work' would be a touch simplistic, so let's be specific. Assuming they're functioning correctly, vintage Les Pauls have controls you can use to achieve a huge range of tones without ever touching your amp or a pedal. Check out archive footage of Paul Kossoff or any number of Joe Bonamassa instructional videos and you'll get the idea.

Bonamassa explicitly states: "What people don't realise about old Gibsons is a significant part of the sound is not in the pickups, but in the pots." He attributes a "nice clean, clear open sound" to the smooth taper of vintage pots working with lower output pickups and military-grade wire and capacitors.

You can buy vintage 500k Centralab pots on Reverb and so forth, but they tend to be highly priced and there's no guarantee that they'll be working properly. Most suppliers stock 500k replacement pots for Gibsons, but what's the best option if you want to get close to vintage spec without buying vintage?

To find out, we're measuring a selection of popular replacement potentiometers. This involves taking the actual value of the potentiometers and then plotting their tapers on graph paper based on resistance readings taken at 10 intervals corresponding to the markings on a Les Paul control knob.

For comparison purposes, readings are taken from all four potentiometers in the 1954 Goldtop we've borrowed for this feature. The actual resistance values vary from a low of 462k to a high of 600k with an average of 537.5k. All four vintage pots also read between 1k and 2k with the control knobs set to one and they are all logarithmic rather than linear.

We average out the readings from the four vintage pots and draw a response curve (see p127). A graph is also drawn for each replacement potentiometers, so they can be individually placed over the vintage potentiometer graph to provide a visual indication of how closely the resistance readings and tapers match.

SMOKIN' POTS

CTS Audio – this is the most commonly used replacement potentiometer and it's fitted in many high-end guitars. The actual resistance value is 508k and resistance remains significantly lower until five, whereupon it conforms to the vintage curve until three before drifting lower. If you're looking for vintage response, this potentiometer is possibly the least-authentic choice.

Alpha 500k – considering it's a cheaper option, the Alpha pot does a lot better than the CTS Audio. It still shows some resistance at one and although resistance drifts very slightly above and below the vintage average, the taper shape actually conforms closely to the vintage taper. The actual resistance is 488k, which is higher than the lowest vintage pot reading, and it has a nice smooth feel.

OPPOSITE Our three test-bed guitars – a Gibson Custom Collector's Choice #26 Whitford Burst, our work-in-progress Greco conversion and a 1954 Goldtop

POT RESISTANCE VALUES

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
BOURNS SHORT	0k	14k	24k	36k	46k	140k	253k	365k	480k	480k
BOURNS LONG	6k	17k	28k	39k	49k	148k	276k	406k	533k	542k
BARE KNUCKLE 1	0k	10k	24k	35k	49k	74k	163k	328k	490k	533k
BARE KNUCKLE 2	0k	9k	24k	40k	54k	81k	155k	304k	466k	509k
ALPHA	4k	12k	19k	38k	55k	73k	207k	334k	460k	488k
CTS AUDIO	0k	4k	17k	29k	43k	59k	98k	257k	423k	508k
CTS VINTAGE	0k	17k	33k	49k	66k	96k	168k	303k	431k	488k
'54 LP V1	1k	10k	26k	38k	50k	78k	172k	305k	460k	493k
'54 LP V2	1k	7k	20k	33k	45k	64k	154k	300k	497k	600k
'54 LP T1	1k	9k	23k	34k	45k	83k	208k	366k	545k	595k
'54 LP T2	2k	10k	24k	38k	48k	74k	182k	323k	458k	462k
'54 LP AVERAGE	1.25k	9k	23.25k	35.75k	47k	74.25k	179k	325.5k	490k	537.5k

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ABOVE TOP The five capacitors – a mix of vintage and NOS models – that we put to the test

ABOVE An Astron/Lafayette cap installed in the Collector's Choice Les Paul

CTS Vintage Taper – this pot certainly gets closer to the vintage average than the regular CTS Audio pot and it's very close from seven to eight and one to four. But the taper is very different between four and seven, where the CTS is noticeably higher in resistance and between eight and 10 where it is lower. Pot resistance is 488k.

Bourns Long Shaft – with an actual value of 540k, this one starts well, but things quickly veer off course. Between 10 and nine, resistance hardly changes, then the taper follows the vintage line, albeit at a higher resistance, until it joins the curve at five and remains quite close from five to one. With its long shaft, this pot might suit Les Pauls with thicker tops and some will like the loose feel.

Bourns Short Shaft – this is fairly similar to the long-shaft version, but there is even less of a resistance change between 10 and nine. From there the resistance decrease is very linear and consistently higher than vintage average, until the lines meet up at five and follow closely to one.

Bare Knuckle CTS 550K – these pots have long shafts and a plus or minus 10 per cent tolerance, which makes them bang on for the vintage range we measured. Testing two of these, we get measurements of 509k and 533k. Comparing the graphs, the 509k pot moves slightly above and below the vintage curve between five and eight, but otherwise stays close. The 533k pot is an almost perfect match for our vintage average from one to 10.

The clear winner is the 533k Bare Knuckle, with the Alpha a very close runner up. If you order a set of Bare Knuckle pots, we'd suggest measuring across the outer lugs to determine the actual resistance values. If you want a bit more brightness, use the higher value pots as volume controls and use the others for tone.

Alpha pots cost around £2 each, so they're a bit of a bargain compared to the £9.95 Bare Knuckles. The closed-back casings will also look more vintage correct, so long as you disguise the markings by soldering the ground wires over the top. However, the shaft is narrower than a CTS, so you may need a couple of wider washers to clamp it in place if you're fitting Alphas in USA-made guitars.

Measuring just 10mm, the short shaft means the Alpha pots we tested should be fine in SGs, Juniors, Vs and so forth, but cannot be installed in some Les Paul-type guitars. Long shaft versions are available from Axesrus, but we can't vouch for the taper at the time of writing.

If you like to use your guitar controls for tone shaping, or think you might enjoy learning to do so, a pot change is recommended. If you have no intention of using your controls below the 10 setting, don't bother changing a thing.

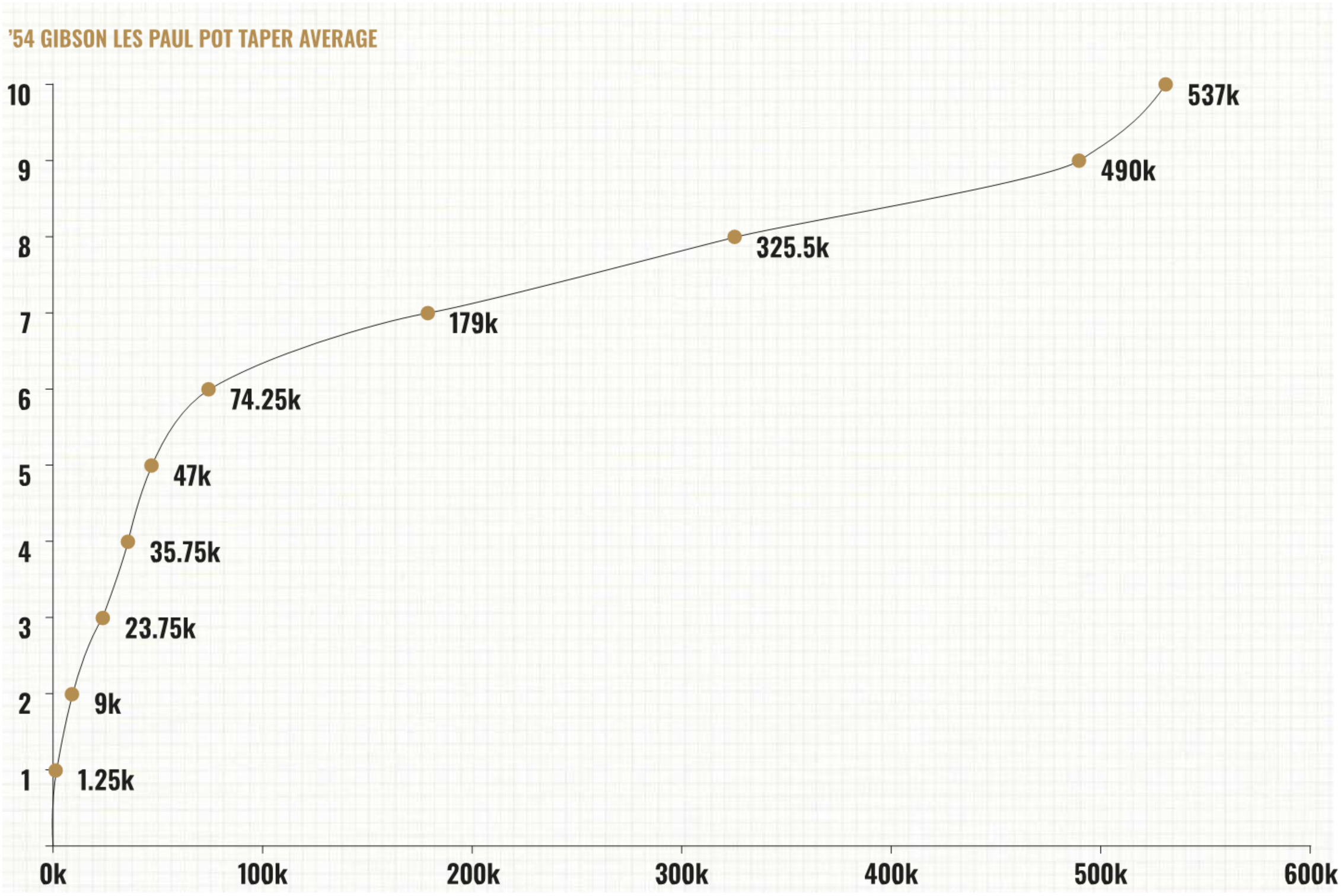
CAPACITORS

Vintage Les Paul enthusiasts can get pretty obsessive about tone capacitors and serious money changes hands for original – and sometimes not so original – 'bumblebees'. These were the Sprague-manufactured capacitors Gibson used during the late 50s.

However not all bumblebees were created equal, and although it's widely assumed they were paper/oil types, the manufacturing process changed and many are more modern-style Mylar capacitors. You can tell the difference because the oil-filled versions have a filler cap protruding from one end with the leadout wire soldered into it. At the other end, the wire goes straight into the capacitor body.

We have no intention of getting into the oil versus Mylar debate, but it is worth pointing out that many of the 'Holy Grail' Bursts left the factory with Mylar capacitors – that's the sound you can hear on countless classic records. The Astron capacitors that Gibson started using in 1960 are lesser known, but we actually encountered them recently in the 1960 Les Paul that started this whole thing off…

Research suggests these are metal-foil capacitors in ceramic tubes. While Burst obsessives are busy chasing bees, you can find old Astrons like the ones in the 1960 LP for less than £10. Sometimes they were branded Lafayette and those tend to be even cheaper. It's worth noting that most old capacitors will have



drifted far away from their stated value. It's safe to assume this is true of many of the caps that have resided undisturbed in vintage Les Pauls for decades, so if a capacitor no longer reads close to vintage spec 0.022uF, it may not matter. In fact, it could actually be beneficial.

While measuring pots is a valid exercise, capacitor choice is more subjective. Instead, we gather a small selection of vintage and NOS capacitors and conduct some blind tests. The capacitors are wired to a rotary switch and hooked up to our Collector's Choice model fitted with Monty's PAF replicas.

During testing, they are identified only by number and we make notes during the testing process.

IF THE CAP FITS

Sprague Hyrel 'Vitamin Q' – this NOS cap is supposedly a paper/oil type and since it's only rated at 200 volts, it's relatively small. We find moderate roll-off quite clear and vocal with a wah-like narrow 'Q' and a hint of vintage quackiness. Things start getting a bit muffled around 4.5 and with the tone control rolled fully back, the lows get woofy. This is a nice-sounding capacitor that measures bang-on 0.022uF, but the tone control's usable range becomes limited with this in the circuit.

Astron/Lafayette No 1 – the multimeter reveals that this cap has drifted from the stated 0.03uF up to 0.084uF. Even so, the guitar retains brightness and with the tone rolled back to halfway, note definition is better than the Hyrel. However, the dynamics feel a bit compressed and with a slight loss of sparkle combined with some graininess in the upper mids, we find that this capacitor obliges you to play harder to sound good.

Astron/Lafayette No 2 – this has drifted even more and reads 0.23uF. Even so, the guitar sounds clear and feels like it has a slightly higher output. There is a quacky wah quality, but the Q is less pronounced than with the Hyrel. We also find the wah effect changes with playing dynamics – becoming more apparent as you play harder. With the tone fully up the guitar is chimey and smooth and when rolled back, low-string definition is retained because the very lowest frequencies are attenuated along with the treble.

Sprague bumblebee – this was advertised as an NOS bumblebee and it appears to be a paper/oil type. As expected, the value has drifted upwards – to

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ABOVE Our test set of original 1953 Gibson P-90 pickups

0.036uF in this case. Again, the guitar sounds loud with this cap and there's a nice sparkle in the treble. The downside is a push in the low mids that adds a touch of muddiness, but it's a decent-sounding capacitor that retains detail.

Russian K40n Paper/Oil – these chubby red caps have been long time TGM favourites and it doesn't disappoint here. Reading 0.023uF, words like plummy, rounded, smoky and balanced spring to mind. With the tone on 10, there's sparkle aplenty and when you roll back, you get a sax-like honk that continues to a smooth jazziness. It may not the best choice if you like your Lesters aggressive, but it's a great cap if you prefer a touch of refinement.

It's hard to say which capacitor produces the most authentically vintage results – or indeed if that's the most desirable and usable outcome anyway. The differences don't really jump out and we find it takes a period of careful listening and experimentation to zone in on what each capacitor does.

Even so, we do have a favourite: the 0.23uF Astron/Lafayette – the capacitor that is furthest away from vintage spec. Loaded in the Collector's Choice with a full set of Alpha pots, the volume and tone controls become wildly interactive and when the volume is around five, rolling back the tone introduces a mid scoop that actually enhances clarity. The centre frequency even appears to change slightly depending on the volume and tone settings. So, the tone acts as both a treble roll-off and a rudimentary parametric equalizer – depending on how the controls are set.

If you listen carefully, you can hear this with regular 500k pots and 0.022uF caps, but we suspect an upwards drift in actual cap value might accentuate the effect.

PICKUPS

This is the big one – and if you get the right type of pickups in your Les Paul, it can have a very profound effect. At the very least, your P-90 or PAF replicas will need to have suitable alnico magnets, steel parts with low carbon content, plain enamel magnet wire and no wax potting. In the case of PAF replicas, the coils will be slightly mismatched.

If you can get those bases covered, you may wish to research the tones associated with different grades of alnico and decide whether you want early style P-90s with A3 or late-50s style with A5. Also research the range of DC resistance readings of vintage pickups and consider how that will impact tone.

If you're ordering from a boutique maker, you will no doubt be able to discuss your requirements and allow the experts to guide you. For this feature, we're actually more concerned with getting the best from your pickups rather than identifying the 'best' pickups per se.

An old pro-audio old adage says the best microphone in the world is the one you have. What it means is that so long as a mic is of a certain standard, great results can be achieved by applying technique and ingenuity.

If the sound is too bright, you move the mic to somewhere where the sound is a little darker. If you need more treble you can do the opposite, and you can balance the low frequency content by altering the proximity of the mic to the instrument being recorded. So how does this relate to pickups?

ADJUSTING PAFS

Although the scope for adjustment is physically restricted, adjusting pickups is very much akin to placing microphones. This is particularly true with microphonic vintage-style pickups such as PAFs and P-90s, because they are extremely sensitive to height settings.

There's no point in throwing in endless sets of high-quality pickups in an aimless search for a specific sound. Unless you take the time to zone in on the optimum settings for a particular set, you may never hear the pickups at their best, or discover the full range of tones and textures they're capable of.

The only tools needed are your ears and a screwdriver. With the pickups set low relative to the strings, you get a darker and more mellow tone but

it may lack bite, aggression and output. Moving the pickup closer to the string will increase output and make the tone brighter. Lift it higher still and you'll get more bite and aggression, but the tone can get become too edgy and shouty, plus the pickup's magnetism may dampen string vibration and reduce sustain.

We take our time getting the bridge just right, always shooting for an even string-to-string balance from bass to treble. We follow the same procedure for the neck pickup, but it's slightly complicated by the need to balance the neck to the bridge pickup. You may notice that low strings lose definition if the neck pickup is set too low. When both pickups are perfectly balanced, the middle setting's voice will be noticeably distinct.

We were perfectly happy with this procedure until that 1960 Les Paul came along and opened our eyes to other possibilities. We soon noticed the bridge pickup was set far lower than usual, but the pole screws were jacked high above the covers to compensate. The bridge sounded almost like a P-90, combining a thick midrange roar with tremendous clarity and soft treble.

Trying this approach with our own Monty's loaded Greco LP Standard copy, we were astonished to discover how close we could get to the tone. All the action happens in the midrange and once you get the hang of balancing pickup and pole-screw heights, you can shift the midrange tonal characteristic and almost re-voice a pickup to your taste.

By taking the more traditional approach to the neck pickup, you can swing it so the neck is just as bright, or even brighter than the bridge. A fantastic tonal contrast can be achieved, and the middle setting will also now have an audible phasiness with slightly hollow mids for a great third tonal option. And if you don't want to go down that route, contrary to what some people might claim, the pole screws can still be used to even up string-to-string balance.

ADJUSTING P-90S

Attention turns to P-90s and we count ourselves lucky to have a genuine 1953 set to test in our Greco. Cutting to the chase, the Greco conversion with vintage P-90s installed sounds virtually indistinguishable from the bona-fide 1954 Gibson Goldtop. This mirrors our findings when we installed a set of vintage PAFs in a Greco in the past.

The set-up procedures we discussed in relation to PAFs also apply to P-90s; however, adjusting height can be tricky. Some use foam rubber for its springiness, but we prefer wood shims. There is another set-up trick you can try to alter P-90 voicing.

Years ago, a prominent pickup builder explained to us how the two magnets in P-90s are arranged to repel rather than attract. Over the decades, this can actually cause the magnets to move apart, and this changes the shape of the magnetic field.

It's the simplest mod to try with both vintage and repro pickups. Slacken off the baseplate screws very slightly until the magnets will slide with a little bit of encouragement. Try moving them a millimetre or so at a time and you may hear how the beefy midrange roar begins to take on a vintage quackiness.

You can try this on just one pickup to achieve tonal contrast, or both if you like the effect. It costs nothing and so long as you note the starting points, the magnets can be returned to their original positions.

OLD OR NEW PICKUPS?

If you only take one thing away from reading this article, it should be that dropping genuine vintage pickups into a decent-quality reissue or copy will get you closer to the actual sound of a vintage Les Paul than buying a top-dollar Gibson Custom or custom-built replica instrument that comes equipped with factory-made pickups.

Prices for vintage PAFs have skyrocketed and you need to be careful, because some replicas are scarily indistinguishable from real ones and sadly, there are a few dishonest sellers out there. But even if you are prepared to pay around £4,000 for a vintage set, you would still have a grand or so's worth of change to play with before you start getting into the price range of even the cheapest second-hand Collector's Choice Gibsons.

At the time of writing, there were three 1950s P-90s on Reverb for between £330 and £360 each. Granted this isn't cheap compared to even the best replicas, but as a magic-bullet solution for vintage Les Paul tone, a set of vintage P-90s may end up saving you a lot of effort, time and money. You could even buy one at a time as funds allow.

VERDICT

Although a range of factors interact to produce vintage-style Les Paul tone and controllability, our

BELOW The Duggie Lock Burst's pickups were set low, but the pole screws were jacked up

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ABOVE Our tone tests reveal that, to us at least, the pickups are the most important factor for authentic vintage-style Les Paul sound

test results suggest some are more influential than others. Everything we have learned so far about vintage Les Pauls leads us to conclude that the pickups are the most important factor and the wood is possibly the least of it.

Of course the wood matters, but so long as your Les Paul has a non-chambered mahogany body with a solid maple cap, a rosewood fingerboard and a glued in mahogany neck, the fundamentals are in place. We'd probably argue that a long-tenon neck joint and a fully loaded weight of somewhere between 8.2lbs and 10lbs are desirable features, too.

We've reached our conclusion by experimenting. Having had the opportunity to load vintage P-90s and PAFs into a couple of 80s Grecos, there's no denying that copies can sound almost exactly like the real thing. When vintage Gibson hardware is installed, too, the results are truly staggering. Sadly vintage hardware has become very expensive, but if you can afford a piece here or there, you will hear a difference. In the meantime, we'll continue our investigations in the hope of finding repro hardware with authentically vintage tonal characteristics.

Let's be clear about potentiometers. If you increase the pot's resistance by 10k, or even 100k, you will get a bit of extra brightness. However, it's not a massive change and the most crucial factor is the way they respond. We have established that modern pots with vintage-accurate tapers are available and they are affordable.

Capacitor choice has an even more subtle effect and only those with keen hearing will detect a difference. It's quick and easy to install a bunch of capacitors on a rotary switch to audition them, so simply pick the ones that sound good to you. All the vintage ones will have drifted so far out of spec, it would be misleading if we told you to buy a specific type or value.

The reality is that the majority of us will never be able to afford a genuine 50s Les Paul and it's easy to spend our time gazing wistfully at vintage pictures, reading every article and hanging out on forums. As fun a pursuit as this undoubtedly is, it ultimately doesn't get us any closer to the sound in reality.

Alternatively, you can get proactive about it. We hope we've demonstrated that not having a spare £220K in the bank doesn't disqualify you from enjoying vintage Les Paul tone. Get creative, be prepared to compromise and you may find yourself very pleasantly surprised with the results. *G*

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